Mountains of Necessity

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BY

HESTER WHITE

"Seeing this vale, this earth, whereon we dream,
Is on all sides o'ershadow'd by the high
Uno'erleaped Mountains of Necessity,
Sparing us narrower margin than we deem."

—MATTHEW ARNOLD.

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TO M. W.

MOUNTAINS OF NECESSITY.

In the dreary bare room of an Indian bungalow a man lay dying;—a man in the prime of life, whose strongly made frame, wasted as it was to a mere shadow by fever and weakness, still showed the remains of stalwart beauty and vigour. The fiery life-draining heat of an Eastern summer stole in, although *kuss-kuss tatties*[1] well sprinkled with water had been fitted tightly to the window-frames. The light was dim, yet gave no sense of coolness.

Into the sick man's dreams came thoughts of England, home, and dear ones whom he would never see again; a passionate craving for a breath of fresh sweet air, for the touch of a soft hand on his aching burning forehead. Death,—that was the verdict, and he knew it; knew that he must die—alone.

[1] Screens of *kuss-kuss*.

Not in action, with a shout of victory in his ears and the wild exultation of battle filling his veins; but still, like a true soldier, calmly, bravely, although the enemy was pitiless consuming fever, from the deadly grip of which there could be no escape. He threw up his arm and let it fall again like a log: the exertion sent the blood to his brow; then a smile passed suddenly over his face, a courageous almost happy smile. A moment later, as he turned uneasily from side to side, his eyes fell on a man who entered the room and came to his bedside.

"Have you done it?" he questioned eagerly; his voice was hoarse and weak.

"Dear old chap, you don't really mean it. Look here, it will only upset you; try and rest a bit, and don't worry over it."

The other raised himself, and again the colour rushed to his forehead; his eyes shone unnaturally.

"For God's sake don't deprive me of the chance of doing a last little bit of good in this world!" he said with excitement. "I can't rest; it isn't that I want to sell them, but I wish to do what I like with my own — it is my own, I tell you, and no one else has any earthly right to it."

"Certainly, of course, but — er — suppose she doesn't consent?"

"She will consent — you can manage that — there's not much time to be lost, old man——"

"I will bring her," the other answered unsteadily in low tones; a sudden spasm of pain contracted his features, and he turned away quickly.

"Thank you; you are the best chap in the world."

The dying man fell backwards, again he smiled, and a look of contentment gathered in his eyes.

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CHAPTER I.

"I CALL it an infernal swindle, nothing more or less."

The speaker was a big, good-looking, soldierly man of about forty, attired in a white linen suit. He was seated before a shabby mahogany writing-table of many drawers (which stood in the centre of a large, bare, whitewashed room, remarkable for its untidiness), and accentuated the vigour of his remark by placing the note he had just written, face downwards on a piece of blotting-paper, and smiting it violently with the palm of his hand.

"I've never married, I've no wish to marry, I've no widows and orphans—I mean, I shan't have when I die—I work like a nigger for my country; yet I'm supposed to hand over every year a considerable portion of my hard-earned savings in order that—well, in order that Mrs Brown may mourn in the hills and marry again

within the year, or the Miss Robinsons send to London for their ball-dresses——"

"You don't know much about women if you imagine they can do that sort of thing on what you contribute, old chap."

His friend, lolling back in a low chair with a short pipe in his mouth, spoke with the superior knowledge of a married man. He was a fine specimen of a ruddy, healthy, contented Anglo-Indian, whose splendid constitution and strong vitality had triumphed over every variety of climate, and permitted him to indulge in the wildest acts of imprudence with impunity. Mr Tom Tremaine was head of the telegraph department at Gurmpore, and his garden the best in the place.

It being his way to take things as they came, he made himself quite happy without his wife, who, after two years of married life (during which time she saw a great deal of Indian society and very little of her husband), had elected to return to England and live at Cheltenham with an aunt.

He always found life bearable, but it had been made many degrees pleasanter by the advent at Gurmpore of Major Hugh Evans, who had been appointed cantonment magistrate.

The two men became friends at once; their tastes were the same, and their characters sufficiently dissimilar to supply the two halves of a whole.

Evans was generous, warm-hearted, impulsive, without caution; consequently boyish still, in spite of his forty-three years. He had never married, and cared very little for the society of the gentler sex. His profession, sport, the companionship of his men friends, and a hundred other matters were all-sufficient; women stood to him without this charmed circle which made up his life. He did not despise or dislike them, but treated them with a condescending tolerance and indifference, distracting to many fair ladies accustomed to adulation, who admired his handsome appearance and strong dominant personality.

Years before, in early youth, he had experienced what is commonly called a "disappointment." His keen imagination, as unrestrained in those days as his temper, had transformed a very ordinary young woman into an angel, and set her among the stars; in common with many other weak mortals, she could not long remain in so exalted a position, but fell to earth, marrying a rich bucolic squire advanced in years, and

sending a foolish, impetuous young soldier, not to the dogs but to India, with—as he thought—a broken heart, and a brain sick through the loss of illusions, the destruction once and for ever of a happy power to create and believe in an ideal. Had he later on felt the necessity of a home and a wife to look after his house and order his dinners, he might perhaps have married; but at the time of his misfortune he had exchanged into a native cavalry regiment, therefore he belonged to India, became absorbed in her interests, and absolutely contented with a bachelor life.

He possessed a small estate in North Wales and was comfortably off. To marry and bring upon himself the worries which afflicted his friend, he reflected, as the years went by, would be an intense bore if nothing else. He never failed to heed the unsatisfactory marriages that came before his notice, but entirely ignored the happy ones, remaining supremely ignorant of the beauty and peace which love can bring into the poorest home, and of that mysterious affinity and companionship which would most especially have appealed to his ardent affectionate nature.

Tom Tremaine laughed a great deal at his expense, lazily, good-humouredly, to his face, never

behind his back. Indeed it was recorded that the jolly simple Cornishman had only once been known to show temper—namely, on one occasion when pretty Mrs Latour, carried away by momentary wrath, had in his presence called his friend a "stuck-up bear," the good-looking Major having denied her the box-seat of the brake next himself because he was anxious to teach a subaltern to drive.

Evans's denunciation of what he disliked was as vigorous and loudly expressed as his applause when pleased to approve.

In the case of the subscription to the officers' families' pension fund, which was deducted every month from the pay of staff corps officers, his abuse of the whole system never ceased. When anything called up the subject, Tremaine was constantly forced into the position of sympathetic listener, whilst the Major anathematised the Government for approving of so preposterous a tax, the military authorities for not protesting against it, and those who in any way advanced or applauded the matter for their lack of judgment and common-sense. We are all said to be mad on one point; undoubtedly Evans's absurdly violent objection to this same pension fund seemed almost eccentric. His

friends began to understand that it was, like M. de Bergerac's nose, a theme not to be treated with flippancy. Money had nothing to do with his displeasure: he would have given twice the sum to a charity which called forth his sympathy, but considered every man entitled to freedom of action with regard to a subscription towards the maintenance of the widows and orphans of his comrades. That bachelors who disapproved of the married state, and thought subalterns, at any rate, lost irremediably if they took to themselves a wife, should be forced indirectly to encourage such folly, appeared to him simply a piece of ridiculous injustice.

"It's never too late to mend, old man," Mr Tremaine remarked as another note was submitted to the sledge-hammer process of blotting. "The best thing you can do is to marry and provide a widow for the fund."

The other's muscles relaxed; he tried to retain a look of anger and solemnity, but finally burst out laughing.

"Thank you, and perhaps you would kindly mention who you would recommend for the situation,—Mrs M'Cormack? She is fifty, and has her pension already. Miss Niel? I would pay her to keep out of my way; moreover, she dis-

likes me. Or Sister Pretty? Do you suggest a trip to England with the intention of 'falling in love'? If a man wishes to make a fool of himself that is a safe way to do it."

"What a pity Mrs Latour is a grass-widow only; she would jump at you——"

"Good Lord! I'm thankful she hasn't the chance——"

"As for Miss Flora Niel—yes, she's out of the question, I fear. I always think that girl's been embittered somehow—not got what she wanted: now and then I have a suspicion that she is a bit over our heads."

"The only thing I know about her at all is that she's as plain-headed a young woman as you'd meet in a day's march. I feel sorry for her; she may try her level best, but she can't keep the whisky-bottle out of Niel's reach. He's her brother; I suppose she's fond of him. I was very fond of my little sister Ellen; I'd have done a good deal for her when we were young together, but she married a chap I didn't like, we quarrelled, and—well, she died. I don't suppose it does to care too much for any one in this world."

"Are you becoming a cynic in your old age? Sister Pretty would suit you best, I believe. I don't suppose her ancestors came over with the Conqueror, but she's merry; she'd make an

excellent widow, and that is what you want, after all."

"It seems you wish to shunt me into an early grave."

"Early? Did I hear you say early?"

"I see a few grey hairs on your head, old man, so don't you talk. Hullo! there's some one outside. Here, Dulmir, *Darwaza bund*,[1] I don't want anybody at present. Stop that, Pickle," as a small fox-terrier jumped from his perch on a cane-chair and barked loudly.

The lithe bearer in spotless white clothes, whose face and movements exhaled self-importance, salaamed and passed out swiftly and silently. But apparently Pickle had betrayed them, for in another minute there was a clatter of hoofs on the dry ground, and a lady in a brown holland habit and a pith hat covered with white muslin, mounted on a large gaunt waler,[2] drew up outside the verandah. She was middle-sized, with dark hair and dark eyes set in a colourless face; the lines of her mouth were strong and almost too decided. It was Miss Niel; she called out in a not unpleasant voice—

"Good morning, Major Evans; I suppose you are there. I don't want you, but Mr Tremaine;

[1] The door is shut. Not at home.

[2] Horse from New South Wales.

I rode round to the telegraph-office to find him, and Toolsieram told me he was here."

The two men looked at each other and smiled slightly. What Miss Niel said was usually to the point—she did not pause to "dress up" her remarks: perhaps it was this that had caused some of the men in the station to call her unwomanly. It is not unusual to mistake directness of manner for want of feeling, and imbecility for tenderness.

Tom Tremaine emerged from the shadow.

"What can I do for you, Miss Niel?"

"Dick is—is not well; he wants to ride over this evening to Dumbala to meet his chief, and I don't think he is—fit for it. You know how powerless I am when he makes up his mind" (this with a short laugh); "I thought perhaps you might help me."

She did not look at him as she spoke, but gazed out into the compound towards the servants' houses, as if intent on watching the antics of several happy naked black babies who were grubbing in the red dust. A close observer would have noticed that she found it difficult to speak as she did before the other man. Tom Tremaine was every one's friend, and it was comparatively easy to confide in him and ask his assistance.

"Drunk again, I suppose," Evans muttered below his breath. As his friend called for his pony, he went out and patted the big waler's neck, remarking that the evening was hot — a scarcely original suggestion.

He was always chivalrous and polite; but even the somewhat tragic circumstances connected with the Niel household failed to raise any interest in the sister as an individual. He did feel pity, for his fellow-creatures could always count on his sympathy; and as the two rode off through the *peepul*-trees[1] which surrounded the bungalow, he stood for fully three minutes gazing after them.

"It's hard lines, upon my word; I wouldn't be in her shoes. Old mother M'Cormack, who has a pretty true knowledge of human nature, declares she is so unselfish with Dick that she can't be bothered to exercise that virtue for the benefit of others. She's probably right. I am sure an eternal screwing to make both ends meet and to keep that young ass in order is enough to sour any one. Poor old Tom! I'm thankful he's got a wife at home; there's no knowing what folly he might not be led into."

Mr Tremaine and Miss Niel rode silently along

[1] *Peepul*-tree of the fig species.

the dusty road. Gurmpore was not without a certain picturesqueness: there seemed less expanse of flat dreary *maidan*,[1] and more broken ground, than is usual in a small cantonment in the plains.

In the midst of the group of bungalows, which stood fairly near together, was a patch of grass surrounded by trees, that to one gifted with a keen imagination and vivid poetic fancy might have recalled an English village green.

Mr Dick Niel, a good-looking, squarely made, and short young man of about twenty-four, with regular features, met them on the verandah. He was hilariously talkative and slightly incoherent, repeating an insignificant anecdote more than once, with the same questions, the same emphasis, and the same fatuous laughter.

Where her brother was concerned Miss Niel relinquished the candour for which she was renowned, for although Tremaine had more than once helped her in difficulties, the true nature of the young man's shortcomings had never been mentioned between them. Tom respected her reserve on the subject, although it struck

[1] Level plain.

him as strange that her strength of mind did not enable her to rise above the useless comedy which she persistently kept up.

He caught sight of her face as she stood behind Niel's chair; the contempt and bitterness in it were very marked.

"She is certainly plain," he thought, "and I suppose she is hard;" then as his eyes wandered round the bare room, for the first time its meagre, almost sordid, appearance struck him forcibly. A *phulkari*[1] bespattered with bits of looking-glass hung over the mantelpiece, on which stood two Benares vases and some cheap Japanese fans. The bamboo furniture was unsoftened by drapery; a common gaudy carpet covered the floor; none of the feminine trifles which give an air of comfort and an atmosphere of home were present. Involuntarily a vision arose of Mrs Latour's drawing-room in Gurmpore, which had been transformed from a dreary whitewashed apartment into the cosiest boudoir imaginable. There a draped *charpoy*,[2] piled with soft many-hued cushions, formed a luxurious divan; Kashmir curtains and delicate muslins covered ugly doorways and unsightly patches on the walls, and dainty silver ornaments stood upon

[1] Embroidered curtain. [2] Bedstead.

tiny "aspinalled" tables. True, two captains and four subalterns, to say nothing of half-a-dozen servants, had been employed for several days on this great work (Mrs Latour was somewhat capricious and often changed her mind); whilst Miss Niel, on the contrary, had never been known to accept help from any one, unless it was Tom Tremaine.

"You should take a leaf out of Mrs Latour's book," he said, following a thoughtless impulse to speak what was in his mind.

She coloured slightly—

"You think it looks ugly and bare: it does. But everything has to be put away when the hot weather comes. Besides, what is the use of spending money on things that are unnecessary? I have left it as I found it when I came out."

"You are above caring for luxury?"

"Not above it. We were rich once, Mr Tremaine—long ago when I was a girl."

"Don't you call yourself a girl now?"

"No; I'm nearly thirty. Can't you understand that if you have to give up things it is best to let it all go?"

She glanced down at her hand. Sister Pretty, the hospital nurse, who professed to be something

of a palmist, had told her the morning before, with a twinkle in her eyes and exclamations of surprise, that artistic perception and love of ease were written plainly on the palm.

"I don't think I do understand," Tom said, replying to her question. Dick Niel interrupted—

"Shesh been slangin' me thish mornin' for keepin' her shorter money. Well, Tremaine, orright—I'll dine with you."

When he had left the room Tom turned to the girl—

"Miss Niel, are you short—I mean, we are old friends now—may I—will you promise to come to me if you are in any difficulty about money?"

She laughed, a hard abrupt laugh that chilled him.

"Oh, thank you; we're not bankrupt yet. What a miserable thing money is! but—you will think me despicable when I tell you that I love it, and sometimes believe I should be capable of selling my soul for it. If it wasn't for lack of it Dick wouldn't have—I could save —Oh, don't let's speak of it. Thank you for taking him off to dinner; I can't think how it is I impose on your good nature as I do."

"You do yourself injustice all round," he said gravely; but he felt snubbed, and, if the truth were known, rather disappointed, as he rode away with Niel in tow. Undoubtedly she was very ungracious.

CHAPTER II.

MRS LATOUR was a lady by birth; she did what are commonly classed as unladylike things in a ladylike manner, therefore often escaped blame where others would have been mercilessly condemned.

In vulgar language, she had a keen eye to the main chance, or, as she would have expressed it, her friends were "very kind" to her; "they seem to anticipate my wishes." Consequently the bungalow she inhabited at Gurmpore had been lent her by a civilian, a Simla acquaintance; the pony and cart she drove belonged to one subaltern, while most of the furniture in her rooms had been provided by another. "Mr Henry has rather a small room, and I am taking care of several chairs for him," she explained to Mrs M'Cormack. "The piano is Mr Frere's; I always play his accompaniments, so it was more convenient to have it here. Captain Lawson brought me those rugs from Kashmir."

The stout lady smiled complacently, and observed that it was wise to get as much as possible out of your neighbours, at which remark her pretty hostess opened her eyes in innocent surprise.

Mrs Latour's husband was a captain in the 5th Pioneers, and quartered at Maidanpore. This place being undesirable, she and her child Doreen, aged seven, had taken up their abode at Gurmpore for the winter, intending to remain until the hot weather provided an excuse for flying to the joys of Simla. Most people liked her, most people gossiped about her, and most people forgot her when they saw her face no more.

There existed a few exceptions: some disapproved of her, and some were in love with her. Amongst the first was, strangely enough, good-natured Tom Tremaine, amongst the latter Mr Dick Niel.

The older man, who in his quiet way was a keen observer, thought this sprightly grass-widow selfish, and at times spiteful; the younger, susceptible and easily moved, had very soon become entirely infatuated about her.

A few remarks when no one else was within hearing as to the superiority of his play at polo,

and the present of a striped waistcoat worked in yellow and black wool by her own hands, sufficed to establish him as her slave.

Many a rupee which his sister refrained from spending went to provide some expensive trifle that Mrs Latour had expressed a desire to possess.

The one man besides Mr Tremaine who did not share with her other friends a talent for anticipating her wishes was Major Evans. He seemed too dense or too indifferent, and she, with a spirit of determination worthy of a better cause, set herself to undertake his education and bring about a reformation. But never did lady attempt a more hopeless task. In the first place, her personal attractions, which were considerable, failed to influence him in the smallest degree; in the second, it never apparently occurred to him that any one but her husband could be called upon to provide her with the luxuries (she called them necessities) she longed for.

She was clever, however, and soon discovered that a deliberate appeal to his generosity seldom failed.

"Major Evans, you are going down to Sirkurbad; will you be so very kind as to bring Doreen 'The Jungle Book,' Rudyard Kipling's

last? She is dying for it, naughty baby; I hardly like to ask you, but——" or "I see you have some lovely pink roses; will you let your *mãli*[1] give me some? I have a tea-party to-morrow——"

Such trifling requests were not easy to refuse; but when an invitation to the tea-party was added and a suggestion that his presence was conducive to its success, he found no difficulty in discovering a previous engagement.

"An aggravating man, very aggravating," Mrs Latour exclaimed in a burst of confidence to Mrs M'Cormack one day.

"Yes, and the worst is he's so handsome."

But in spite of his unsociable instincts Major Hugh Evans could not avoid all festivities instituted by this lovely lady and others in the small station.

One evening he found himself driving the four-in-hand brake out to a wild luxuriant garden four miles from the cantonment, belonging to a native banker, where Mrs Latour had organised a moonlight picnic.

The lady was radiant, sparkling, happy. Her friends had been more than kind in supplying everything required—servants, crockery, and silver,

[1] Gardener.

to say nothing of the necessary food. Seated on the box-seat next Major Evans, she enjoyed the comparative coolness of the evening, and laughed and chattered to her heart's content. He was in the best of tempers, and the somewhat "scratch" team trotted along merrily, passing the crawling bullock-carts and slow-going *ekkas*[1] so rapidly that had they chosen a wrong moment to cross the road they would have run the chance of extinction.

Inside the brake were Mrs M'Cormack, Sister Pretty, Mr Tremaine, Mr Dick Niel, and a young Captain Lawson. They were very merry, Mr Niel being the only silent one of the party: he failed to appreciate the arrangement that obliged him during the drive to see nothing but Mrs Latour's straight white muslin back. He could not even speak to her now and then, for fate had given him a seat at the farther end.

Miss Niel settled at the last moment to drive out by herself. An engagement made her too late for the brake, and if the truth were known, she was in no mood for company, although she could not avoid the picnic — indeed had an especial reason for wishing to go to it.

Flora Niel had begun life under pleasant cir-

[1] *Ekka*, a native one-horse vehicle.

cumstances. The eldest daughter of a Scottish laird and his pretty high-spirited wife, her advent in the world had been surrounded by a hundred fond excitements, born of the joy, love, and pride which envelop the first child of a happy marriage.

When life is young optimism flourishes, and the future still holds a possibility of all things. Wonderful were the dreams Mrs Niel dreamt over her baby's cradle, wonderful the prophecies that proceeded from the mouths of ancient priestesses who had nursed the laird's father or watched the first footsteps of grandmothers and aunts. They discovered a marvellous likeness to the most beautiful of these ladies in the wide-eyed hairless scrap of humanity, whose nose then resembled a small red mushroom.

The evil fairy did not put in an appearance; on the hill a bonfire blazed to the sky, and even the weird legend of misfortune which overshadowed the family was forgotten.

As time passed, however, a love of play, which had unhappily descended to him from his grandfather, began to develop in Richard Niel; the cursed whisky-bottle became a more frequent companion, his moral sense deteriorated, consequently his judgment as regards the choice of friends grew less clear.

When an heir arrived six years later, the rejoicings were less spontaneous. The old ill-sounding rhyme was whispered amongst the people, rain almost quenched the bonfires, and a rumour went about that the banshee had been heard through the storm.

Still, the laird, in spite of his weak character, was a good fellow, and loved his strong-willed brave wife: she might have kept his wavering steps on the straight road had she lived. But, like so many who are most wanted in this world, she died and left behind her the little girl of six (possessed of her own courage combined with the intellect which belonged to the Niels) and a sturdy week-old boy, who, unhappily, even in his cradle, was the counterpart of his father.

It broke Richard Niel's heart; he went to the bad without an attempt to do otherwise. Fifteen years later he had drunk himself to death, and had gambled away every penny. The old place was sold, and the orphans found they were forced to depend on the small income left them by their mother, which luckily their father had been unable to touch.

From the age of six almost, Flora presided as small mother, manager, and head of the house:

the old housekeeper became a cipher, and quite under her sway. She had not time to be young; at thirteen, her mother's diary of her five years of married life seemed pathetically childlike in its simplicity, its belief in the impossible, its doubts and fears. How she treasured that girlish ungrammatical record of happiness and of love, which, forgiving much, had hoped all things and believed all things. As Flora grew older it taught her many lessons: she learnt courage from its pages, and longed for the power that could look with tolerance on faults (even surrounding them with a certain glamour), a long experience of which made her grow hard, bitter, hopeless. "It would have killed her; thank God she died!" she said to herself sometimes, and grew more and more reserved, giving pride rein, taking duty as a watchword, and smothering softer feelings as she did self-indulgence and pleasure. Had she known it, through this renunciation of self and adherence to a stern ungilded law of right and wrong, she lost influence, and saw many, less brave and true than herself, succeed where she failed.

One or two men had loved her, playmates who had known her from childhood; but for such matters there was "no time," and where she

might have cared, she pulled herself up and firmly put all thoughts of marriage aside.

Dick Niel the younger was clever. He passed well for the "Indian Civil"; and so the brother and sister went together to the great Eastern land that provides for, and engulfs, so many of England's young manhood.

The boy was a general favourite: although weak as water and selfish, he possessed a certain generosity and impulsiveness that made him lovable. Flora, on the other hand, was the last person to become a favourite in India; women pronounced her "a frump," and men thought her dull and unsociable. Pride, reserve, and an inclination to avoid every one not cut out after your pattern, are the very last traits to win popularity with those whose lives belong to the great sad country of large hearts, where the stiffness of Europe is unknown, and people are not afraid of each other. Flora Niel was unconventional: she cared nothing at all for the opinion, good or bad, of acquaintances, and was not hard in her judgments; but she felt a profound scorn for the vanity, and what she called want of principle, of a woman like Mrs Latour. She treated with contemptuous indifference many men who might have been her friends, because she con-

sidered them woefully lacking in intellect, and it was only good Tom Tremaine's simplicity and single-heartedness that had at last won from her a certain response. This was strange, he being far from clever. She knew that her inner world of thought would have been absolutely incomprehensible to him; yet his quiet strength was restful, involuntarily she gave him her friendship, and on occasions, when in deep water, appealed to him more than once. His very ignorance of the enormous effort such a proceeding caused her, made it easier to ask his help.

On the evening of Mrs Latour's picnic, seated in the little battered dogcart, innocent of varnish, with her fox-terrier Scamp on the seat at her side and a *syce*[1] behind, she made her pony step out along the wide road which ran straight and white between the green rice-fields, and pondered over a matter that was weighing heavily on her mind. The previous day it had come to her knowledge that her brother was in treaty for the purchase of Giroflé, a handsome country-bred pony, which he intended to present to Mrs Latour on her birthday. The beautiful delicate-limbed creature was worth 800 rupees, or more; the fair lady had watched it win several races at Sirkurbad, and

[1] Groom.

had become possessed with a most fervent desire to see it in her own stable, declaring, while her eyes sparkled and her pretty face glowed with enthusiasm, that just then she cared for nothing else in the wide world in comparison.

Jealousy was this time at the bottom of Dick Niel's reckless resolve to gratify her wish. On the occasion of Giroflé's triumphs, a powerful rival in Mrs Latour's favour had appeared, in the shape of a rich and very bumptious subaltern, who chose to patronise, and even on a certain occasion to snub, Dick Niel, assuming an air of proprietorship when in Mrs Latour's society that was maddening to the other man. One day he let fall a remark that pointed to certain intentions as regards Giroflé, which did not meet with Dick's approval. Foolish with jealousy, regardless of his empty purse, he determined to be before him, and (without his sister's knowledge) to buy the coveted pony as a birthday offering to the adored lady, thereby earning her gratitude, and proving himself—as he expressed it—"as good a man" as his enemy.

Poor Flora Niel, harassed by the many expenses that are inevitable in India (which makes it far from deserving of the reputation for possible economy bestowed upon it in England), and

working carefully against her brother's tendency to extravagance, learnt this piece of news by chance from a trustworthy source. She made up her mind at once to a course which was extremely distasteful to her, but which seemed at that moment the only way to avert what in their small household would have meant a serious disaster; for debt had always appeared to her to be the beginning of all that was bad and miserable. She resolved to appeal to the other woman, or rather — appealing not being in her line — to mention simply what she had heard, and speak of Dick's inability under any circumstances to give such a large price for a horse; leaving the rest to Mrs Latour's good feeling and sense of what was right.

CHAPTER III.

It can easily be imagined that the task Miss Niel had set herself was not an easy one. She despised Mrs Latour, and it hurt her pride to be obliged to allow to any one that her brother had acted foolishly. As she sat at the dinner-table, bright with flowers and silver, she experienced what the French with much understanding call a *serrement de cœur*. Something seemed to tighten literally round her heart, as fragments of Dick's laughing sallies, which appeared to her goaded imagination unnaturally noisy, fell on her ears.

The night was hot and heavy; through the still air came the monotonous note of the anvil-bird, and the sounds of many creatures which ominously predict the approach of the hot weather. Across the sandy paths of the garden black clear-cut shadows lay, tracing sharply the outline of every leaf and twig. Roses, white

hibiscus, and great katulpa blossoms glimmered like ghosts in the glaring vivid Eastern moonlight.

A picnic, in the accepted sense of the word, was scarcely the name for so luxurious and sumptuous an entertainment. The silent natives in their snowy garments moved swiftly to and fro, anticipating the wants of the guests; everything of the best was provided. On one side of Flora sat a cheery little clergyman, Mr Lox, who came to Gurmpore at intervals to perform service in the church; and on the other a very young and shy subaltern, commonly called "the brat." Boys liked her, as a rule, and after a time he hazarded a few remarks regarding gymkanas, past and future, and the inadvisability of bringing long-haired dogs out to India. Both thought her "more than common" silent, and both as usual pronounced her hopelessly uninteresting.

As for the pretty hostess, she was in her element,— brilliant, successful, queen of the hour. Doreen, across whom fell a shaft of reflected light, ran hither and thither, passing remarks on her elders, climbing on to the knees of the young men she particularly favoured, and listening carefully to any conversations she opined might be diverting, owing to the fact that those

engaged in them appeared anxious they should not be overheard. "I'll kiss you because my mother has known you since you were a child," she remarked with condescension to Captain Lawson.

Games were instituted; Mr Frere sang songs to the banjo in a throaty baritone, and several couples strolled off through the moonlit walks—some of the men taking turns for the society of the few ladies with accommodating unselfishness, while the others congregated at a table sacred to whisky and soda, and smoked their cigarettes silently.

In vain Flora looked for her opportunity,—it was difficult to find Mrs Latour alone. She did, however, come upon her at last, seated on a stone bench beneath a dusky tamarisk-tree, Mr Tremaine at her side. Perhaps this gentleman read something in the girl's face that caused him to make an excuse and depart precipitately,—perhaps he wished to escape: at any rate, he left them together.

Flora knew that her time was short, and began at once.

"Dick is only twenty-four," she said after a few words of explanation, during which Mrs Latour uttered several exclamations of innocent surprise.

"I feel so sure that you would be the last to wish him to spend money which as a matter of fact he doesn't possess: of course he is acting entirely without your knowledge, and when you expressed a wish to have the pony——" Her eyes were fixed on the tamarisk-tree; she did not notice that the pretty lady's colour had risen slightly, and was therefore unprepared for her indignant interruption—

"I never expressed a wish to have the pony. I don't understand you. How can I help it if my friends guess my thoughts? It is not my fault."

"I mean he understood that you wished to have it——"

"And he intends to buy it for me? Dear boy, how sweet of him! It is silly, of course, but what can I do, Miss Niel? I have no power over them, tiresome wretched men: only last week I said to Captain Lawson, when he brought me a lovely bracelet from Hamilton's, 'I cannot accept it,'—those were my very words; 'you must not indeed spend money on me.'"

"Isn't that the bracelet with the pink sapphires you are wearing now?"

"Ye-es; unluckily he was very obstinate, and I couldn't hurt the poor dear fellow's feelings, so at last I was obliged to take it."

"You have power with them, Mrs Latour, if you would only use it: you seem to like my brother, and I am sure you can say a great deal without hurting him."

"I can't see how it is possible. I don't want him to give me the pony, stupid boy! but I am very soft-hearted, Miss Niel. I look on him as a sort of son. He has often thanked me for my influence and advice, and so if he wishes to show me in some practical way that he is grateful——"

Flora interrupted, her lip curled contemptuously—

"I am only asking you to exercise that influence wisely."

A touch of sarcasm in her voice was not lost on Mrs Latour. The two women faced each other, one pale and rigid, the other flushed, indignant, excited; both determined not to give in. It was war.

So thought a man who had come round a corner of the shrubs and stood a moment, hesitating whether to go back or forwards. He decided to beat a retreat, and would have done so successfully had not Mrs Latour caught sight of him.

"Major Evans, you shall judge and decide

between us," she cried, and her voice went into a still higher key. "Mr Niel, dear kind fellow! it appears, is going to buy Giroflé for me—you remember Giroflé? Miss Niel does not approve, and wishes to set me the difficult task of telling him he is not to do so, when the whole matter is supposed to be a secret!"

Major Hugh advanced with reluctance: it was undoubtedly embarrassing that he of all people should be asked to settle what seemed very like a quarrel between two ladies.

"Is yours an appeal on behalf of the defence, or a speech for the prosecution?" he asked, laughing.

A faint colour rose to Flora's cheeks. She drew herself up, and turning to her adversary said stiffly—

"I don't think we need trouble Major Evans: I am not ashamed of being poor, and I merely wished to tell you that my brother cannot afford to give the price asked for Giroflé. He is young, and doesn't realise that in order to pay it, I—not he—would have to save for months, to say nothing of being forced to use money which I had hoped to employ in a very different way. However, I am afraid I have failed to make you understand, so I will apologise and wish

you good night. I think I must be going back."

Mrs Latour held out her hand and smiled sweetly; her voice was tremulous and shrill—

"Pray don't apologise; I assure you I understand perfectly now. Naturally, if you keep the purse it must be very unpleasant for you when your brother wishes to give presents to his friends. Good night; so glad you were able to come."

Hugh Evans had a peculiar antipathy for anything feline. As he watched the fair lady and heard her remarks a word of three letters formed itself on his tongue—c-a-t. With Tom Tremaine's stories of the Niels' poverty in his mind, he glanced at Flora: pity he had always felt for her, and now he was struck with the fixed look of sadness in her face, the lines of pain round her mouth.

Suddenly he interrupted—

"You asked me to act as judge, and it seems to me you are clearing the court. That will never do. If you will wait a moment, I think I can settle the question to the satisfaction of every one without calling witnesses. Mr Niel can't buy Giroflé, for the very reason that he belongs to me."

This most unexpected announcement was received with the greatest surprise on the part of both ladies. Flora gave him a quick inquiring look; Mrs Latour almost screamed—

"You, *you!* You lucky man, you have got Giroflé! When did you buy him? when does he come? Tell me about it. I knew you thought of it at one time, but I heard you had given up the idea. Indeed Mr Buck wanted to get him——"

"In order to present him to you? I am afraid, dear lady, that although I would do much for you, I cannot quite promise to——"

"Oh, how unkind you are! of course I never dreamt of such a thing: you all set on poor me. But perhaps you will let me ride him sometimes, the beautiful darling. Good night, Miss Niel; glad you were able to come. There, she's gone! Thank goodness, intolerable frump! Dick's not a baby; surely he's old enough to spend his money as he likes,—she need not manage his affairs for him."

"He can't manage them himself, and we all know he has a little weakness for play. If you are anxious to use your influence, you might lecture him a bit about that."

"As if I don't! I am continually saying,

'You silly boy! why do you do it? if you were always sure of winning, it would be a different matter.' Those were my very words a few evenings ago when he was sitting with me talking of his troubles; he invariably comes if worried (indeed they all do, I don't know why), and is kind enough to say he loves the cosy prettiness of my poor little room after the bareness of his own bungalow. She keeps him very tight, and it must be miserable, whatever you may say. You men judge each other so harshly, but from my childhood there has been something in my character that makes it impossible for me not to sympathise with people——"

"With Miss Niel? Ah! had you there, Mrs Latty!"

"Oh—ah—well—how horrid you are! You must remember that Dick is my friend—indeed, like a son, as I said to his sister; and I cannot bear—it is, in fact, painful to me—to see him misunderstood and downtrodden by that—that *woman*. You think me unnecessarily severe; but I confess that my whole nature rises in protest against injustice and bullying."

Her voice grew shrill again with virtuous indignation. The picture thus presented to Major Evans of Dick Niel as a martyr tyrannised over

by a grim sister, from whose fierce clutches Mrs Latour, in the character of guardian angel, was anxious to save him, appealed strongly to his sense of humour.

"Shall we go back?" he asked drily, and led the way without leaving his hostess time to suggest any other course.

Flora Niel, meanwhile, was driving home as she had come—alone with her dog. An immense load had been lifted off her mind, and Mrs Latour's words had left no mark: she threw them behind her with a lofty disdain which would not have pleased the lady.

It was strange that Major Evans should have bought the much-coveted pony, and a great piece of luck. Before he interrupted them it had already become apparent that Mrs Latour was determined not to make any move in the matter. She overtook Mr Tremaine, who asked her to give him a lift: he had sent his *syce* and pony on, and the man had made some mistake and missed him.

Feeling disinclined for conversation, she did not make it. They drove on through a tracery of black shadows cast by the *peepul*-trees without speaking.

Suddenly she startled him by breaking the silence—

"Do you think I am hard on Dick, Mr Tremaine? Do you think I drive him to seek refuge in Mrs Latour's gilded bower?"

"I am sure Dick requires a tight hand over him: you are his best friend."

"Do you think I am stingy?"

"No; why do you ask such a question?"

A certain directness in his answer struck her.

"Because I know you do. I feel it—you can't deny it."

"No, no——"

"You think I care for money, and you are right; but I will tell you why I do, because you have been so kind and—and I don't want you to have such a bad opinion of me."

"My dear Miss Niel——"

"I don't care what any one else says: I saw Major Evans look at me to-night just as you did the other day when I—I talked of money. Hush; let me finish. Dick has not had his leave. I want him to get a year—to go home; he will be ruined if he is not taken out of this groove for a bit. We would travel—I have heard of a doctor who—oh, Mr Tremaine, you don't know how sweet his nature is, how generous and affectionate: he can't help his weakness, and perhaps

I have been hard in my desperate effort to keep him from—from temptation."

"I think he would have been lost without you."

"Well, I allow that I am mad to save and save. I feel like a miser——"

"You know what I once asked you to let me do?"

"Yes, and I was ungrateful; you didn't realise what I felt all the time. But you mustn't say that again, or I can never talk to you or ask your advice."

In his mind, being a gardener, he made use of a gardener's simile, and thought, "She opens out under the moon-rays like the 'Marvel of Peru.'" He had never known her so expansive; the remembrance of his silent judgment on this very question of money caused a pang of self-reproach. He had misunderstood her, as many in the station did.

"You are a brave woman, and you are wise. The boy may still be saved; he has good impulses, but is tossed by every wind that blows. I can't understand that he is your brother."

She laughed shortly. "You think we have both missed the happy medium?" The old look came back to her face, which had softened into gentleness.

"I think you are rather bitter sometimes: you take things too seriously."

"Yes, you are right; perhaps I make tragedies where there is only comedy. I don't know much about happiness, and I suppose that has soured me."

She had never spoken of herself before: her mood puzzled him, and he only found the key to it when, on the following morning, he met Major Evans, who told him of the scene he had witnessed, and of one or two other things that made good Tom burst into loud guffaws of laughter, and utter the following enigmatical remark, while he vigorously slapped his friend on the shoulder—

"I'll back you against any one in this world, old chap, for doing a generous thing on the impulse. I wonder it hasn't got you into hot water more often."

As to the purchase of Giroflé: on the night of the picnic Dulmir left Gurmpore for Sirkurbad by the twelve o'clock train, and two days later the beautiful creature appeared in Major Evans' stable, much to the astonishment of every one except Mr Tremaine, who again laughed loudly as he patted the glossy chestnut neck. Messrs Buck and Niel were deeply annoyed, and swore that Blundel of the 5th B.L. had not "played the

game." But the latter declared that, having promised Hugh Evans first chance, he was bound to keep his word, and it was not his fault if that gentleman chose to make up his mind at the last moment.

CHAPTER IV.

THE hot weather drew nearer, and the air was full of the strange sense of expectation which precedes it, as if all nature were waiting breathlessly for the approach of a great unassailable enemy. Down on the parched withering rose-bushes poured the burning pitiless sun, changing fairy-like gardens into furnaces of scorching white fire. People in England do not realise that it can be possible to hate sunshine. The crows sat open-beaked on the trees, panting and subdued, windows remained religiously closed from nine in the morning until five in the evening, punkahs were hung, and *kuss-kuss* screens fixed in the doorways.

Major Evans departed for some poisonous region on an expedition connected with his work, and Mr Tremaine accompanied him part of the way, and then went to fill up his short leave with shooting on the hills.

Not many from Gurmpore found their way to the hills. Mrs Latour, as a matter of course, fled to Simla directly the heat became what she called unbearable. She had only once ridden Giroflé; and, alas for the futility of earthly hopes and ambitions! her determination to obtain sole control over the chestnut beauty during Major Evans' absence, and perhaps extract permission to take him as a loan to Simla, failed entirely.

Whether the Major had suspicions of the fair lady's cordiality during the few weeks before he left remains unknown; but at any rate he was impervious to her attractions, and such remarks as, "How sweet it was of you to come to my rescue the night of my picnic," and "You are so nice and big and kind, there is no one in the place I would sooner ask a favour of," made no impression upon his hopelessly insensible mind.

Instead, Giroflé passed into the care of an impecunious horsey subaltern, who received strict injunctions not to allow any woman to ride him, —which pointed to a knowledge on the part of Major Evans of the world in general, and of subalterns in particular.

The Niels remained at Gurmpore. Flora looked pale and worn; her brother in a magnanimous mood suggested a fortnight in Simla, declaring

that he would "stump up" should there be any difficulty about expense, and might possibly run up the hill himself and fetch her down. Which proposal, taken in connection with the fact that he had lost 200 rupees at cards the night before, was slightly unpractical.

Nevertheless it touched the sister, and, with certain reservations, she unfolded to him her plan for going home.

These reservations belonged to a scheme pondered over many days, which had to do with a cure for dipsomania, started by a doctor in Paris. This cure had apparently proved very successful where the patient was not already fully confirmed in the habit of drinking. Flora had loved her father in spite of his shortcomings; but the terrible *Trinkkrankheit*,[1] as the Germans call it with reason, that had devastated his life, had seared her own, bearing her with him through the valley of degradation, bringing her bitter shame, yet pity also for the man who might have been so different.

How could she let his son, her brother, sink into the same bottomless pit? He was young still, and the temptation had not become absolutely irresistible. It would perhaps be possible to save

[1] Drink disease.

him yet, for he possessed good impulses, and at times showed remorse and a wish to reform. But she knew that as long as he remained at Gurmpore she could do nothing, the counter-influences were so strong, and the climate was a thirsty one. On the voyage and in England he would come back to her, and might consent even to spend part of his leave at the doctor's establishment in Paris.

Dick Niel was not at all averse to the idea of a trip home: he adored Mrs Latour when near her, but did not think of her much when she was absent. He laughed at his sister's assurances that only through great care and economy could they manage this journey, but (while hoping devoutly that she would not discover his losses at play) promised faithfully to do his best.

Meantime one or two events of importance happened to break the monotony of the weary hot days.

Sister Pretty had her hands full: several privates fell ill, and a subaltern down with enteric wanted all her attention.

Mrs M'Cormack, who never did anything like other people, chose the hot weather for starting on a trip to England.

Mr Tremaine returned, and spent much of his

time with the Niels, drawing from Flora gradually the truth about her proposed expedition to England and how much she built on it.

He sighed as he walked home at night and saw Dick with men who were not his equals, wondering if any new mischief was brewing of which the sister knew nothing, hoping that no disappointment was in store for this woman whom he had warned not to take things too seriously; who, nevertheless, regardless of advice, had concentrated her whole being on one object, leaving no place for thought of herself or anything outside the aim she had in view. He longed for Major Hugh's return; but when he did come back he was tired, cross, and out of sorts, and discussed with irritability all subjects that were disagreeable to him, notably the widows' and orphans' pension question, which was on his mind at the best of times. This was so unlike the good-tempered cheery Major that his friend became uneasy, and persuaded him to see the doctor.

The latter belonged to that type of army surgeon, happily growing rarer, who starts by knowing very little, and does not try to add to his knowledge, but spends his time in riding, playing polo, &c. Unlike this type, however, he was not

ashamed of confessing his ignorance, and allowed that Hugh Evans' case puzzled him. He was suffering apparently from a species of low fever, picked up probably in the unhealthy place he had just left; but it remained to be seen into what it would develop.

One morning, during an early ride, Tom Tremaine told Miss Niel how anxious and worried he felt, and at her suggestion, Sister Pretty being occupied, went in search of an old Eurasian woman who knew something of nursing.

It is sad and dreary work to live through the hot weather in India at a small station in the plains when many are sick. Mind and body both succumb to the inevitable depression arising from monotonous days and airless nights, which pass slowly, unrelieved by any new matter, excepting that Captain Smith seemed rather better, or that Private Brown was dead, and Mr Lox had just come in time to bury him.

Unhappily the bulletins concerning Major Evans were far from satisfactory. Tremaine sat with him a great deal: he was quieter and more patient than he had been at first, which caused his friend considerable anxiety,—to be patient was very unlike Hugh Evans. Tom had never been really ill in his life, and did not realise that when

a man is weary and weak he becomes curiously subdued: the old woman could do what she liked with him.

Meantime Flora Niel began to grow uneasy about her brother: he had come home more than once severely drunk, and twice had asked her for money, excusing himself on the score that he had no change handy, or no time to go back to the bungalow for the sum he wanted.

It was undoubted to her that, even when not really tipsy, he was constantly in an unnatural state. Anxiously she counted her store of savings and grew haggard, while the lines on her forehead deepened.

One day, as she added ten rupees to her treasured hoard, she started and hastily counted it over. The blood rushed to her forehead, and then left her white as a ghost. Two hundred rupees were missing.

With clasped rigid hands she sat immovable for several minutes, and her mouth hardened, her eyes became fixed. Who could have done this—bearer, *khitmagar*,[1] *ayah?* Rapidly her thoughts passed judgment on each, and as rapidly pronounced one and all innocent. She went into her brother's room and told him what had hap-

[1] Butler.

pened: he was seated at the table writing, with his back towards her.

"It must be your fancy," he said shortly; "I expect you thought you had put them there."

"It is not my fancy—I have no doubt on the subject."

"Don't bother me now, please," he continued irritably; "I am busy with rather a ticklish bit of work."

Slowly she moved away and sat down silently in the bare stifling drawing-room. Scamp sprang on her knee, and did not understand why his little attentions failed to call forth a response.

That night Flora lay awake, and something like despair crept into her heart: the dreary creak of the punkah worked itself into a weird jingling rhyme, "Save him, save him, take him home—home—save him—save him."

The old watchman's coughs and groans in the verandah and the distant howl of a jackal seemed to join and swell a wild chorus of warning and woe. The Celtic blood in her veins brought a touch of superstition to her otherwise well-balanced mind, that strange mixture of contradictory characteristics so often to be found in Scottish natures. All the tales of her childhood came back; the headshakes of village dames,

whispers of omens seen and heard, and the scathing legend belonging to her family — vengeance on the males of the house of Balnaggan.

In the morning she asked Dick what she should do, and suggested a trial sometimes resorted to by the natives (when anxious to catch a thief), the fear of which often causes the culprit to secretly restore his ill-gotten spoils without delay. A holy man arranges all the servants and suspected people in a row, gives each a handful of dry unboiled rice, and commands him to chew it. The rice munched by the guilty man becomes dry powder, for terror dries up the moisture of the mouth.

Niel answered angrily that he'd be hanged if he would allow any such tomfoolery, and declared that he believed she cared for money more than for anything else in the world. What were two hundred rupees? why bother about them? There were a great many other things to think of; Smith was jolly bad and Evans was dying, and that was enough for anybody in one morning.

"Major Evans dying! Who told you?"

"Tremaine: he's distracted, poor chap. They say there isn't a chance for him: he's conscious, but won't last long," he replied, and went out.

Flora forgot the money; a great cloud of misery swept round her—was every one to be unhappy in this world? The strong, handsome, healthy man lay low, his life ebbing away, and her kind friend's heart was breaking—just as her own—just as her own. Yet death was better than disgrace surely, a hundred thousand times better—"Save him, take him home." Was her brain going, that the kite's quavering whistle and the clatter of the *chiks*[1] in the verandah, as some one lifted them, took up the refrain.

Tom Tremaine stood before her, white, stern, wretched, with the stamp of pain on his strong plain face.

"You have heard?"

"Yes."

"Well, he's going. There is no time for words; will you do something for him?"

"Gladly, thankfully—anything in the world."

"Will you marry him?"

"Great heavens! Mr Tremaine! Are you mad?"

"It must seem like it, I allow; but I mean it. Look here, Miss Niel; you are a large-minded woman, you can help the dear old chap to die happy—it's a fad, no doubt, but all these

[1] Blinds.

days—goodness knows why, one can't account for sick men's fancies—this infernal officers' families' business has been on his mind. He began by asking me, with gruesome humour, if I would provide him with a widow. Of course I tried to laugh; but he persisted, and said he would die happy if he could feel the money which would have been due to his belongings, had he had any, went to some one he knew and who wanted it. Curiously enough, he pitched on you suddenly. I think that night of Mrs Latour's picnic remained in his thoughts, and he—he knew about things from me, what you wanted money for——"

"Mr Tremaine, I can't—I can't: anything else. Don't you realise what you are asking me to do? To give up every scrap of pride, of self-respect——"

"By no means. You want to take Dick home—you are right. It's little enough you will get, but it may help. Besides, I don't wish you to think of that; that's not my—our side of the question. I ask you to soothe a dying man's last moments, to gratify a last wish. I have the licence. The Padre, Mr Lox, is there; he will stay all day, all night, until—it may be a whim, but——"

"You are mad; I cannot——"

"You will not—I am sorry."

"Go away! oh, for God's sake leave me alone! I am distraught enough to-day as it is."

Tom Tremaine left the room quietly and sadly: Flora sank down on the floor, her head against the hard cane chair. Again the refrain began, "Take him home—save him"; but with these words others mingled, "A dying man's last wish—dying man—dying——"

It was like her that even now she never thought once of what people in the station would have said and thought, had she agreed to the strange compact suggested.

"He is dying—dying."

All day it haunted her. In the evening Dick came back in a maudlin state. He threw himself down on a chair and burst into tears—

"I can't schtand it, Flo; I'm mi-ishrable; that chapsh been awfly good to me."

A mist came over the sister's eyes: with a strange softness, most unusual to her, she knelt beside him and put her arm round his neck, her cheek against his, forgetting the hated incoherence and unnatural accents, difficult and constrained through a strong effort at self-control.

"Whist, whist!" she murmured soothingly. The attitude and words belonged to their childhood. Suddenly he turned and buried his face in her shoulder, sobbing—

"It's not only that. I'm a d——d scoundrel, Flo; I took the money—couldn't rest until I told you. It was to pay Parkins—I've lost a lot to him. I was not myself—it's all this cursed drink —I was frightened to tell you. I'd pull up if I could; but I swear that when the fit's on me, if you told me there was strychnine in the whisky I should take it all the same. Can't you help a fellow, Flo? It's devilish hard lines; I've been a blackguard to you, I know, but it's ruining me——"

Sobs stifled further speech, his shoulders shook. Convulsively she clasped her arms tightly round him,—her whole soul went out to the boy who had been her care for such long years, who had often disappointed her so bitterly. Her thoughts were—

"He was frightened — I have been hard — I have not helped him enough; I have pushed him away from me—I will save him. What am I that I need consider myself—I will never be hard again, never, *never*."

CHAPTER V.

HALF an hour afterwards Dick Niel was lying on his bed sleeping heavily. Flora sat watching him, her hand in his: the poor boy had clung to it as if he felt that in her lay his only hope of salvation.

She had pinned a damp towel on to the punkah, and as it passed to and fro it threw fantastic shadows upon his weak high-bred young face, changing it curiously. With a pang of horror she seemed to see her father as he had looked shortly before his death, the once handsome features disfigured and bloated, marked indelibly with the traces of dissipation. She remembered what their old doctor had said—

"It is often the finest characters that get to this. Not the low stupid ones, but those who might have been the highest and best."

Gently she drew away her hand, and sinking down by the bed pressed her hot forehead against

the sheets. Then she rose, and going into the next room wrote a short note and gave it to one of the servants with some directions.

It was addressed to Mr Tremaine, and contained very few words: "If he is still of the same mind, I will do what you wish.—F. N."

The brother slumbered peacefully, all unconscious of the crisis through which his sister was about to pass. She left him so when Tom came to fetch her, and a quarter of an hour later stood with set lips and a white wan face at Hugh Evans' bedside.

He lay there a shadow of himself—a strong man stricken by deadly fever, his eyes large and bright, his cheeks sunken, and the soft damp rings of fair hair curling tightly upon his forehead, giving him an almost boyish look. He seemed to belong to the other world already; nothing of this earth held him. As Flora approached he smiled a sweet happy smile, and she caught the words, "It is good of you." She could not speak, bitterness and self-condemnation surged up within her: even then she did not feel glad she had consented, the other side presented itself so forcibly to her mind. Money—filthy lucre—what place had it here, in the sacred presence of death? Tears rose to her

eyes, a lump to her throat; she bent her head silently.

It was a strange scene. The lights burned low, the punkah swung monotonously, now and then a white-robed native passed noiselessly through the room. Pickle, the terrier, lay curled round at his master's feet. Through the windows, which had been thrown wide open to catch any possible freshness, came all the well-known sounds of a hot airless Eastern night — the insects' chatter, the flap of a bat in the verandah, a jackal's wild unearthly cry.

Mr Lox looked scared and serious, thinking he had lit upon an unsuspected love-story and tragedy. He gazed wonderingly and sadly at Flora's drawn face, on which the suffering of the last few hours had left its mark.

The fat greasy Eurasian woman scarcely knew whether to smile or weep. When not attending to her patient, she placed her hands upon her shapeless hips and watched the proceedings with keen interest: these gentlefolk were queer people. The doctor, in white breeches and brown boots (he had come straight from polo an hour or so before), tried to disguise his astonishment: he had certainly never suspected that there was anything between "good old

Evans" and "Flo Niel," as he called her when none of her friends were listening. It was all too marvellous; he wondered what "Mrs Latty" and Sister Pretty would say, and some of the "chaps" who declared that no one in this world could induce the Major to marry. Certainly he was leaving it for another, and herein, perhaps, lay the key to the enigma. Like many men who profess to be women-haters, he had probably been "let in" for an engagement—which might have come to nothing had not remorse caused him on his death-bed to make a tardy reparation for his indifference.

As Dr O'Brien glanced at the girl in her white dress, standing slim and immovable beside the bed, he thought she looked like a creature hurt to death.

He felt the sick man's pulse and signed to Mr Lox; there was no time to be lost.

The chaplain drew nearer; on the silence of the dim bare room fell the impressive words of the marriage service.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered together in the sight of God," &c.

"Hugh Vaughan, wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife? forsaking all other, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?"

"I will," faintly but firmly.

Then—

"Flora, wilt thou have this man as thy wedded husband?" and again the refrain, "so long as ye both shall live?"

What a mockery it was! "I will" came from Flora's lips like a sigh; she felt as one in a dream. Again, again, "in sickness and in health, till death us do part."

Why had she not read these solemn words before? They seemed to condemn her act as one of wickedness and profanity.

The man on the bed lay back smiling kindly and pleasantly; he kept his eyes on the girl's face as he held her hand. Presently there was a murmur, "the ring." Grasping the situation at once, he drew a thick gold band from his little finger, on which it hung loosely, and held it out to Mr Lox.

With a startled gesture Flora shrank back: a slight colour rose to her pale cheeks; but in another moment the ring was in its place. Quietly they all fell on their knees: the two were pronounced man and wife.

She did not rise: when the last words had died away she bent over Hugh Evans' hand and kissed it.

"Thank you," she said almost inaudibly: he alone heard the whisper and understood. Mechanically she signed a paper that was put before her, then stole into the verandah. Tom Tremaine overtook her and grasped her arm; the tears were rolling down his cheeks.

"You—you—sit down a moment; it has been too much for you."

She turned on him fiercely—

"Let me go! God forgive you for having made me do it!"

Then she ran down the steps into the garden and disappeared in the darkness, the little gold ring slipping up and down on her finger.

Tom went into the room again and sat down beside his friend: he had never quite understood Flora Niel, he did not understand her now.

Hugh Evans was already sleeping quietly, the sleep of exhaustion. It was eleven o'clock when Flora reached her bungalow. Dick came out in pink-and-white pyjamas: he was thoroughly sober, chastened, tender, in his best mood.

"Where have you been?" he asked.

She held out her hand, on which the gold band glistened, and answered wearily—

"I am married; you were tired—asleep—I

didn't tell you about it. I am married to—Major Evans."

Dick started as if he had been shot.

"What do you mean?" he asked blankly, looking at her with some alarm and anxiety.

"You think I'm mad. It's true enough—Mr Lox married us; he is dying, and—and wished it."

Dick took her by the shoulders, turned her face to the light, and gazed into her eyes—

"You were out in the sun to-day. Go to bed, old girl; I'm afraid you've got a touch of fever." It was plain he thought she was wandering. She laughed shortly—

"You don't believe me?—go and ask them. I went with Mr Tremaine after you had fallen asleep. I suppose you—never knew that—you didn't guess——"

"Great Scot! it's true, then?" His hands dropped at his sides, his mouth gaped, "Well of all the—but——" Then in an awe-struck whisper, "Is he dead?"

She understood that he wondered why she was not at the bedside of the dying man who was her husband.

"No; it—it was best that I should come away. Good-night, dear; don't ask me any more ques-

tions now; I think I will go to bed and try to sleep."

She left Dick to digest the great surprise that had burst upon him.

Flora went to her room, but not to bed. She sat fully dressed in a little straight bamboo chair, with her hands before her, staring into space. At times the events of the day became a strange jumble in her mind. She sank into a half doze, and awoke struggling in a wild ineffectual effort to reach England, where Hugh Evans lay dying and calling to her.

Then again the whole thing appeared impossible: the scene in the dim dreary sick-room seemed born of her weary brain. The transparent ethereal face of the man, who shortly before had been full of life and vigour, Mr Lox's low nervous voice, his twitching lips; Tom Tremaine's tears, Dr O'Brien's awed looks of astonishment and scarcely suppressed curiosity, Pickle's veiled barks as he dreamt of monkeys and squirrels, which fell with curious bathos on the ears of the little group of listeners, all seemed unreal.

Surely the whole was a weird dream, a nightmare, caused, as Dick had suggested, by the sun or a touch of fever. She, Flora Niel, could not have taken part in that strange scene. The silent

wild-eyed girl who had stood by the bedside and listened to those stirring words must have been some one else—a stranger, a creature of fancy.

Flora Niel! That was not her name now. Flora Evans! It was all true: the gold ring was on her finger; he had taken it off his hand, given it her himself, she was his wife.

"In sickness and in health, till death us do part. . . . Forsaking all other, keep thee only unto him, as long as ye both shall live."

How the words rang in her ears! She had sworn this before God; she was his wife, yet here she sat alone, and he—he was dying. He had done it out of kindness, out of charity—she bit her lip and shivered—but could that now go for nothing? Could she accept the kind thought which Mr Tremaine had called a sick man's whim, without any sense of responsibility?

It was forlorn to die thousands of miles away from home. She did not even know if he had a mother or sister; but some woman must have cared for him, some woman would cry when she heard. Beyond his true friend Tom, there seemed no one; the others did not count. She would go to him—why had she not done so before?

Hurriedly, and as if afraid of losing a minute, she left the house.

The lights in Evans' bungalow were still burning: she crept in quietly, and met Tremaine. He looked at her with some surprise, and then his grave face lit up.

"He is rather restless just now."

"I—I came to see—if I could help."

"Thank you; I have no doubt you can."

She stood in the gloom behind the bed, which was beneath the punkah, and looked across at the sick man, who tossed restlessly from side to side. Tears rose to her eyes, her heart overflowed with great tenderness and pity; she would do all she could, if only out of gratitude.

"Tom, Tom!" he called suddenly, in a weak unnatural voice. "What are you doing? Who is that? Here—where the devil has Dulmir gone? I told him to bring some ice. Who were you talking to?"

Tom went forward and whispered something; perhaps tact was not his strong point. The answer to his well-meant communication fell with fatal distinctness on Flora's ears.

"For God's sake spare me that—keep her out of the way—I didn't bargain for——"

His friend interrupted hastily—

"All right, old man—all right; here's Dulmir with the ice——"

The girl in the darkness flinched as if she had received a blow in the face. She flushed hotly, and then grew deadly pale. Tom coming back saw that she had heard: he gazed at her full of distress, and stammered—

"Don't mind—he often gets irritable like this —please stay——"

She shook her head without speaking, and passed out. When he would have followed her, she waved him back, and he wisely obeyed—letting her go alone. He knew it was useless to say another word.

Once, in the half-light of the starlit night, she broke down utterly. The "last straw" had done its work: she cried as if her heart would break.

"It's my fault—my own fault. I can't even help now as a friend, a nurse,—not even out of common humanity."

It had been a generous thought, an act of kindness; but having accomplished this act, he wished to wipe out the remembrance of it—to forget her name, her existence.

He had perhaps scarcely a day to live, and if he thought of her at all during his last hours, it would not be as his wife, but as a woman who had lowered herself for the sake of money. Truly

the iron entered into her soul as she found herself in her lonely room once more. Her swollen eyes ached and smarted, and she bent and kissed Scamp's soft muzzle with dry hot lips.

"You will always think well of me, old dog, won't you?" she whispered, with a grim smile more pathetic than tears.

Dick had been right when he suggested a probable touch of fever. A fit of ague seized her now, and shook her whole frame, and then followed the burning, exhausting sequel.

The *ayah*, who had been troubled about her "*Miss-sahib*," crept in and ministered to her. She never wondered at the strange doings of the *Sahiblog*;[1] they were quite beyond the comprehension of any native.

For two days Flora could not move from her bed, and perhaps it was fortunate that this was the case.

Dr O'Brien and Mr Lox did not hesitate to publish the wonderful piece of news in their possession to the station. Apparently there was no reason for secrecy; and they would have been more than human had they refrained from communicating such an exciting event to the rest of the Gurmpore world, which was stagnating

[1] Gentlefolk.

through sheer monotony and lack of material in which to interest itself.

Many were the comments passed upon this strange marriage. Intense amazement was the strongest element in the feelings of all. "Who would have thought there was anything between those two? How little onlookers can tell," &c.

It did not surprise them that the newly-made wife had fallen ill too: it was indeed a tragedy. She was tied to her bed, could not go to him or nurse him to the last.

"What would Mrs Latty say?" thought Sister Pretty, who was a lover of the romantic, and wished fervently that other work had not prevented her from nursing Major Evans: she might possibly have saved his life with care, and have been present at that sad tragic wedding. But Mr Smith, the subaltern, was dangerously ill too, poor boy, and with heart and soul she wished to see him well again.

No information could be obtained from Dick Niel. Major Evans' illness and his sister's unexpected marriage seemed to have sobered him: he avoided his undesirable friends, and appeared determined to try and keep straight.

CHAPTER VI.

In three days Flora was about again. She had looked ill before, and many hours of fever did not improve her.

Major Evans still lingered. Dick went every day to inquire, and he watched his sister curiously as he brought news. The whole thing was a mystery to him: he thought her apathy sprang from misery and an aching heart.

The fourth morning she was alone in the drawing-room when Tom Tremaine came in. He looked worn-out and wretched. She grew very pale and did not speak, but her eyes questioned him.

"He is unconscious. I want you to come."

"What can I do? If he knew he wouldn't wish it—you can't deny that."

"It is not possible to judge of what a man feels when he is ill and irritable," he answered evasively. "We are all knocked to pieces. Mrs Da

Souza has had hysterics twice, and I have got Lawson to let me have one of his men from the mountain battery who has been used to nursing. I know it is a great deal to ask of you, and you look ill; but if you would come——"

He spoke humbly, almost apologetically.

"Is he quite unconscious?" she asked in a low tone.

"Absolutely, poor chap! he has not had a lucid interval since ten last night: he talks continually, but about his home and the work he had up at Ibarsi."

Flora rose. "I will come," she said quietly; then wrote a note to her brother, told the *ayah* to pack a few things and follow her, and putting on her sun-helmet, got into Tremaine's cart and drove away. That anxiety to shield her from gossip had also helped him in his resolution to gain her assistance in nursing her husband, never occurred to her for one moment.

The heat was very great; it had been impossible to keep the room cool in spite of all their efforts.

Everything looked much the same. The woman squatted wearily on a low stool, her head in her hands, a pitiful figure in a tawdry red blouse and smart gold brooch and earrings. The punkah flapped drearily; a square jovial-looking gunner

with a red round countenance was mixing something in a glass; while Pickle, who probably hoped it was for him, jumped up and scratched at his knee.

"Come and look at him," Tremaine said, for Flora hesitated.

She drew near the bed, and as Evans caught sight of her, his wild eyes seemed to light up with recognition.

"You've come, dear old girl!" he exclaimed joyfully. "How long you've been!—I knew you'd come——"

She was startled, and the blood rushed to her forehead. He grasped her hand as if he could never let it go: his tones were those of a boy in the fulness of his youth.

"Take care, little girl; you'll wet your feet if you cross there. Go round through the hay-field, and I will meet you at the other end." He turned and twisted, and then called out again—"Ellen, you won't go? I have wanted a talk with you so much—I'm worried—it's a difficult business; they'll settle it without me if I don't make haste: Gulab Singh is behind it—quick, get me my boots—I shall be too late——"

He sprang up, and would have jumped out of bed; but she caught his arm, and the gunner

came across the room and held him gently but strongly.

"Lie down, sir; it's all right—I'll see about it," he said with quiet respect, as if speaking to a man in his right mind. Evans fell back, and was still for a little.

"Go and get some sleep," Flora said to Tremaine; he looked dead tired. "Tell them all to rest; I will call Wood if I want him."

She had seen much of illness, and was not nervous. She drew a chair to the bedside, and in a few minutes was alone with the sick man. Again he gazed at her affectionately, and murmured, "It's jolly to have you here, Ellen, my dear little sister. I thought I should never see you any more. Have you given up that chap? I don't know why I never liked him."

He needed no reply, but responded to the pressure of her fingers and was quieter.

What a strange day! And many similar ones followed. Flora's nursing powers contrasted favourably with those of the Eurasian: she exercised a mild yet firm sway in the sick-room, and the rest obeyed her orders, bowing to her rule, without an attempt at insubordination.

"Upon my word, Mrs Evans," the doctor said, startling her by using the name which was so

unfamiliar, and which she would thankfully have discarded — "Upon my word, you know more about it than I do."

Hour after hour she sat at Hugh Evans' side and listened to his rambling talk. Beyond the bungalow things went on as usual; nothing changed because a man was dying. Across the yellow compound the air quivered and danced like a mirage, heavy with heat. The leaves and brown pods on the trees were shrivelled and dry; a water-carrier limped slowly backwards and forwards with his water-skin; a kite hung in the sky uttering its eternal whistle; a white buzzard, its terrible skinny neck extended, stalked across the burning paths, intent on a scavenging expedition. Now and then a rider would clatter up to the verandah, and there were muffled words of inquiry. This often roused the sick man; but in fancy he was mostly among the English haycocks or fishing in a brown cool trout-stream, while his sister called over the lawn, and he answered, "Little stupid! come and see what a basketful I've got."

"Where is that sister now?" Flora thought, as she gazed out to the sun-scorched garden. "Does she guess that the brother she loves is passing away from earth with her name upon his

lips? Is she laughing, happy, enjoying herself?" The girl did not know that Ellen had already reached the farther side.

There were others who came into his fever dreams,—his mother, a young brother out of reach in far Kashmir, and schoolboy friends; and once as she bent over him he cried out, "Darling, no one will ever love you as I do."

Those passionate accents belonged to years gone by. So the man who was proverbially indifferent to women had loved some one long ago.

A sudden jealousy gripped Flora tightly. She was his wife: although she did not wish for his love, had never thought of gaining it at any time, she coveted love in the abstract. Very little had fallen to her share: she had even wondered at times whether Dick would care much if he never saw her again.

Who was the woman to whom he called so imploringly, and who had had power to raise tenderness in Hugh Evans' breast? Had she died and left him mourning her all his days? Had she forgotten him? The tears came into her eyes and rolled down her cheeks: it was inexpressibly pathetic to listen hour after hour to the wanderings of his restless fevered brain.

Through the silence came suddenly the sound of a sharp volley of muskets. Evans started up.

"What is that?" he cried. "Have they shot Gulab Singh? I wanted to do it but I didn't; tell them it was not my order. Here, give me my clothes. Who has taken them? what the mischief——? It can't go on without me——"

Tom Tremaine was at his side in a moment: he held him down and tried to soothe him, then looked gravely across at Flora—

"I was afraid he'd hear it, and had everything shut up as tightly as possible. It's for poor young Smith; he died this morning; they are firing over his grave."

The boy of twenty-three had gone, slipping away quietly and peacefully at the last, yet this man found it difficult to die: his spirit struggled and battled to be free, but the earthly prison-house held it back; his grasp on her hand was still strong and firm. How well she grew to know his face, the dark, deep-set, blue eyes, the straight sweet mouth with its small fair moustache, the slightly aquiline nose and square chin.

He looked so young, for illness had banished the restraint and acquired dignity of maturer years—scarcely older than Dick, who came in daily and stood gazing down at him with quivering lips.

It seemed so long, and she prayed for his release: she was worn out, and almost at the end of her strength.

One evening he fell asleep, and breathed so quietly that she thought the time had come at last. She laid her fingers on his burning forehead and signed to Dr O'Brien, who entered at that moment.

He watched his patient silently for some minutes, then felt his pulse, put his hand on his heart, and gazed very closely at his face.

"By Jove! Mrs Evans," he said, "there is a change. I shouldn't wonder if he doesn't pull through after all."

Flora gasped and caught her breath quickly. She forgot everything at the moment but the joy of a nurse over her charge: she only felt the overwhelming life-giving radiance of hope, which flashed across her inward vision and illuminated the world of dreariness and despondency which had surrounded her all these days.

Afterwards, when the sick man slept on, when during the quiet night hours she heard him stir and say to Tom, in faint but natural tones, "Hullo, old chap, what are you doing here? Have I been ill?" the reality of the situation began to force itself upon her with horrible distinctness.

"What did it mean?" She stood in the darkness and clenched her hands convulsively. Tremaine came towards her, his face aglow with thankfulness. "He is conscious—he knew me—he is going to live now——" he began, then stopped short in deep concern. "What has happened? What is the matter? You look as if——"

"Oh, don't you realise?—don't you understand?"

Something in her voice enlightened him. He started.

"My God! I never thought of that!" They gazed at each other for a short space in silence: it was evident that the gravity of the case impressed him as fully as it did the girl herself.

Evans called from the bed; he had caught the sound of muttered whispers. A wave of colour swept over Flora's pale face; she sprang back, and, as if all the furies were driving her, seized a few of her belongings that lay about—a sun-helmet, a fan—and rushed out into the darkness and along the deserted road to her home.

What could she say to her brother? "He is getting better;—I have come back." How would it sound? Must she begin to lie for the

first time in her life? Dick was asleep now; there were a few hours still in which to think. The *ayah* crept in by-and-by. Tremaine *Sahib* had sent her; he was distressed, and wondered why *Miss—Memsahib* had gone. She might be ill, he thought; if not, would she return?

Flora shook her head.

"*Memsahib* must rest, for the Major *Sahib* is better. Was he asleep when *ayah* left?"

"Yes. And the Doctor *Sahib* had just been, had talked with him, and looked quite happy."

But he was in danger still: would it not be better if he died now, before he remembered? When he knew he would ask for death sooner than—— O God! She sank upon her knees, and an awful despair seized her. Surely she had been mad that day, frightfully, hopelessly mad! the real true meaning of what she had done burst upon her with horrible vividness. For the sake of a few rupees she had bound herself to this man, who hated women, hated the thought of marriage, hated bondage of any kind, and looked upon her with supreme indifference and probably contemptuous pity. In her misery she exaggerated everything and did not spare herself; all her imperturbability and courage seemed to have

gone, sapped away during those sad days and nights. A great cloud of humiliation enveloped her: she thought with bitter shame of the moment when Hugh Evans would awake to the remembrance of what he had done, driven by an impulse, a whim, and believing himself to be dying.

Tom Tremaine came in later: he was horrified at the change in her.

"If you worry like this, you will kill yourself."

"I wish I could die; I wish to Heaven I could! it would be the best solution."

"Don't talk like that!"

"You know it is true. Has he remembered yet?"

"No. He said something; but I think he fancies it was all part of his—his wanderings. You mustn't make yourself miserable; besides, he is very weak—he may not——"

"Don't say that!" she interrupted hotly. "I want him to get well. He will—he must get well; but something will have to be done. Can't you help me? Is there no divorce possible? It must be arranged. What can you think of me? Why did you make me do it? It is your fault!—you ought to have known!"

Tom looked at her with amazement,—he had not guessed her capable of such passionate

vehemence. He felt hurt and sad at her reproaches, and answered gloomily—

"I can do nothing. I wanted to ask you to come back. We don't know how to get on without you—and what will people say?"

"I don't care what people say: that is a very small part of it. I will never go back—I will never see him again in this world, if I can help it. I wish I was a different kind of woman, Mr Tremaine. I would throw myself into the river—I would take an overdose of laudanum; but I haven't the pluck—I haven't the pluck——"

The last words sank into a wail: she buried her face in her hands. He came over and stood near her—

"You haven't the pluck to condemn two men to lifelong remorse, you mean?"

"I have done that already."

His grave gentle voice touched her: she burst into wild tears, such as Tom Tremaine in his life had never witnessed.

He was wise, and waited without a word, his kind heart cut to the quick. He felt his share in the matter keenly.

Fortunately Dick had gone out for a morning ride.

At last the fierce sobs died away; she paced up and down the room twice, and struggled to control herself. When she spoke her voice was hoarse and constrained: she held out her hand to him—

"Forgive me for abusing you. What should I do if it wasn't for you? It was all my own doing. Leave me here to think; my head is dazed now."

"You will take care of yourself and rest; you won't——"

"I won't kill myself, you mean?" The short hard laugh was like her former self. "No; I tell you I haven't the pluck to do that. I shall go away — right away somewhere — with Dick. I can't think now—it will come to me. Don't let them forget the brown medicine at nine. There's Dick: I will go to my room."

CHAPTER VII.

MEANTIME Fate decided Flora's plans. She fell ill: the strain had proved too much for her, and for several weeks she suffered from prostration and want of nerve-power.

Sister Pretty, who was still busy, came to see her very often: her good-natured but rather common chatter, and ill-disguised attempts to probe the mystery that surrounded what she called "the romance of the station," irritated the sick girl. The nurse attributed her apparent insensibility to the low state into which she had fallen after the terrible anxiety caused by her husband's illness.

As for Evans, he was gaining strength every day.

His friends never knew when the truth first dawned upon him, when he first realised that he had awakened to life again—a married man. A new and clever doctor who passed through

Gurmpore just then prescribed for the Major, said he considered that something was retarding his recovery, and suggested his wife's illness and absence as likely to be weighing on his mind.

"No doubt," Tom Tremaine answered conclusively; but as he walked home in the evening he sighed deeply.

Hugh Evans was a man and a gentleman. During the long hours of convalescence he had deliberated very seriously upon his strange marriage: it was far from his intention to shirk a responsibility he had (however foolishly) brought upon himself. The thought of denying Flora her rightful position as his wife never occurred to him: she had been hopelessly compromised by his hasty, heedless action, and he, not she, must suffer the consequences of such an egregious bit of folly. His imperfect knowledge of a woman's varied characteristics prevented the smallest shadow of doubt from entering his mind as to her concurrence in any arrangements he might be pleased to suggest. He was not a conceited man; but some acquaintance with Mrs Latour and her type, combined with a certain tolerant disdain of the fair sex in general, caused him to quietly ignore the possibility

of his newly-made wife having ideas of her own on the subject.

As long as he was ill he had not asked for her, and she had begged very strongly that nothing should be said of her having nursed him.

One evening (the rains had broken) he lay in a long-chair in the verandah smoking, a shadow of himself, and Tom, who had just come round, stood watching him with delight.

A slight colour rose to Evans' pale cheeks; he jerked his thumb in the direction of the Niels' bungalow, and asked—

"Where is she? what is she doing?"

Tom looked out across the fast reviving garden and watched a hoopoe, as if his one thought just then was to see its sharp long beak pierce the moist ground.

"She's ill—the heat, I suppose, or something of that kind."

"Oh." Then after a pause, "Well, old chap, I was a d——d fool; and this time I've been and gone and done it, as you prophesied I would some day. I suppose there's truth in the old saying, 'While there's life there's hope.' Certainly no man ever skirmished on the border-land more thoroughly than I did: I can't understand why the higher powers decreed that I should pull

through. Once on board the lugger, you know, it would have been better if I had snuffed out. Malison wants me to go up to Mount Abato for change; my young brother's regiment is there, and he'll be back by this. It won't do to set the people talking—I suppose they've talked enough as it is?"

"She's been ill, you see; and they think it is from the strain of—ahem—they think it has been caused by grief."

Evans burst out laughing.

"By Jove! if it wasn't so serious, it would appeal strongly to my sense of humour."

Tom did not respond. He was thinking of the last time he had seen Flora—of the despair and misery in her face, of her wild eyes, and the painful agonised sobs which had come from her very soul.

"What — what do you think of doing?" he asked presently.

"I suppose I must go to the hills, and I suppose she'll have to come too——"

His friend was in no laughing mood, but at this his lips parted with a grim smile.

"Perhaps she won't go. You know she wants to get home—with Dick—that was what made her do it, if you remember——"

"Yes, of course—by Jove! the money—but I'll settle that easily enough. It's all my fault, you see, and the great thing is to prevent them gossiping about her."

"But I don't think she'll accept the money——"

"Why not?"

"She's as proud as Lucifer——"

"Proud! Then why did she——"

"Oh, God knows!" Tom interrupted hastily: again his eyes were on the hoopoe, which had returned for further investigations. "Once she said it was all my fault—it's of no use beating about the bush, old man, and not telling you the truth. She's mad on the subject; she wants a divorce. She—she doesn't wish to see you."

There was silence for some time between the two men. Each was busy with his own reflections. Tom fell into despondent brooding, and bewildering thoughts were breaking upon Hugh Evans. At last he said slowly—

"She wanted me to die, in fact. Of course I ought to have died."

"No, by Jove! she didn't, though. Why, when I saw her just before she got ill, her last words were to tell them particularly not to forget the brown med——" he stopped abruptly.

"Forget the *what?*"

"Oh I—I don't know, I'm sure—I—I—it wasn't that at all——"

"I thought you said something about brown?"

"Did I? Oh, I—as a matter of fact I'm rather muddled this morning."

"Tom, my boy, you don't lie easily—out with it—why humbug me——"

"I couldn't do that if I tried, and what's the good? It's only this. As I have said to you before now, she's a bit over our heads—she takes things hard. I daresay it might have been all right, but—but she thinks—she knows somehow——" Tom began to blunder again. "She fancies you don't—in fact, it's the truth, old fellow—you know that only your sense of honour makes you take it as you do. Perhaps if you could see her and persuade her——"

"Tell her I am in love with her, eh?"

"No; she wouldn't believe you. You might make her realise, though, that unluckily there's nothing else now but to accept the situation."

"That's what I intend to do, Tom" (very decidedly). "When a man has come as near dying as I have, it makes him think a good deal more seriously than he ever has before. I know that there is no way out of it. She's a lady, and the least I can do is to protect her as far as

possible from the slander of evil tongues. You told me, I remember, that her great idea was to take the boy to some doctor; well, that's capital—a year's reprieve—and I must consider what is best about money."

"I tell you she won't take it."

"She *must!*—that's nonsense." This in the quick short way of a man accustomed to command. "Of course if I was quite fit I'd go to her; but she's ill, you say. Shall I write, or will you see her for me and give her a message?"

"I'll see her, if you like."

Evans sat up, settled his pillows, took his pipe from his mouth, and assumed what some of the subalterns called his "office air," which was usual to him when he had a tough bit of business on hand.

"Tell her it's entirely my fault—that I ought not to have got better—that none of us thought it possible. Say that it's of no use crying over spilt milk, and we must make the best of a bad job. Then you can let her know that you told me about her wish to go to England, and mention that I think of giving her two hundred a-year as —what do you call it?—pin-money——"

"Stop, stop——"

"Don't you consider that fair?"

"Yes; but—see her yourself—wait until you are stronger——"

"But you know her so well. You always saw something in her that I can't, worse luck! She would listen to you——"

"I don't know," Tom answered gloomily, and thought, "I am a coward." Back came the memory of the scene in the verandah on the night of the marriage and the look in her face, the stupendous wrath that had flashed upon him from her eyes, the fierce words, "God forgive you for having made me do it!" He had the feeling somehow that Hugh Evans was like a man preparing to ride happily across a sweep of green turf which in reality covered a hidden bog, a morass of unguessed trouble. He strongly admired his friend's courage and philosophy, that enabled him to discuss the matter with cheerfulness, which, if not quite the genuine article, was a very good imitation of it. But he saw breakers ahead, and tried vainly to pierce the dense curtain that hung between the future and his own uneasy thoughts.

He descended the steps of the verandah, and walked slowly along the garden path, gazing with unseeing eyes at the busy life in the dripping rose-bushes and short grass. Here the russet

"sisters," with their keen yellow eyes, pecked and scraped, like seven fussy, soberly clad spinsters, and the lively magpie-robin gazed down upon them full of superiority and disdain.

When he returned he said quietly—

"I will go and see her and give her your message. I think it's the best plan under the—after all."

Tom Tremaine wrote to Flora that evening, and begged her to let him know directly she was well enough to receive visitors, for he was anxious to speak to her on a matter of importance. She answered at once, and asked him to call the next morning. As he had suspected, she was able to be about, but preferred remaining quiet and keeping the "door shut" to the station.

She was lying on a long cane chair, and held out her hand to him without rising. He thought she looked very white and thin, and that her eyes were larger than ever.

"What do you want to say to me?" she asked, after a few remarks on trivial matters. Tom's embarrassment did not escape her.

"Of course you know?"

"I suppose it is something about—about Major Evans. What does he think? Have you found a way of escape?"

She tried to speak in the quick abrupt manner

usual to her; but her voice trembled, and a slight colour tinged her cheeks.

"Will you come and see him?"

"No; I told you that before."

"I hoped you would change your mind."

"I am not like other women in that respect—I don't change my mind."

"I'm sorry; but at any rate he has asked me to bring you a message."

"Yes?"

"He has been recommended to go to the hills; he wishes you to come too——"

Flora uttered a sharp exclamation; but Tom proceeded deliberately, bent on performing the duty assigned to him, "He knows you want to take Dick to England, and that it is the reason you—er—consented to—but he thinks you might do so in another two months. Meantime he is anxious to prevent people from talking; he says it was entirely his doing, and——"

Flora interrupted. He saw that her face was set, and the old determined lines were about her mouth. She did not look at him; but her eyes, full of pain, gazed out into the bare compound.

"Major Evans is very generous," she said in a low voice. "Will you tell him I appreciate the thought which prompted his—his suggestion;

but that nothing in this world would induce me to accept what he offers. It does not matter about people, they may chatter as they like. They will only say we have quarrelled, and that is not unusual. Spare me the shame, the humiliation, of meeting him. He had no wish for a wife—they called him a confirmed bachelor—therefore I cannot have cut him off from marrying some one else. Let me go away—let it be as if it had never been."

"Then you still want to go to England?"

"Ye-es; I hope we shall be able to——"

"Well, he wants — he is anxious to make it possible."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you—are his wife; he wishes to—to give you an allowance, which will enable you to—to do as you like."

Tom paused; it was out at last. The storm did not burst. He began to hope for the best; but one glance at her was enough to convince him that he had been too sanguine. The colour had risen to the very roots of her hair, her head sank on her breast, she moved as if to leave her seat, then covered her face with her hands. Every line of her drooping figure expressed dejection and self-abasement.

"Forgive me," he said suddenly.

"There is nothing to forgive. But don't you understand how deeply and terribly what you say hurts and humbles me? Oh, I deserve it all, I know; but it makes me realise how low I have sunk."

"My dear girl, you exaggerate—you are mistaken, morbid — it is because you have been ill."

"I feel," she continued, hardly noticing his interruption, "as if I could never look any one in the face again."

"Nonsense! you will soon think differently, I hope. But look here; suppose I say that I understand you to a certain extent, suppose as an old friend I combine the asking of a favour with some good advice—will you listen?"

"Yes; I can promise to do that."

"I want Dick to get leave at once; I want you to go to England with him for a year, and—I want you to let me lend you the money: it will solve many difficulties. Now, Miss Niel—er, I mean, Mrs Evans—don't refuse. You know how much I would do for you; but as yet you have denied me the ordinary privileges of friendship."

His honest face was full of anxiety; but after a few moments she turned and held out her hand

to him, smiling, though her eyes had filled with tears.

"Thank you. You are a good friend to me, and I am afraid I try you very much; but this time I will do what you ask, take your advice and accept a favour as well—for the favour is to me."

CHAPTER VIII.

A FEW weeks later the Niels had sold most of their possessions (after the manner of Anglo-Indians), given up their bungalow, and were on their way to Bombay, *en route* for England. Dick was in high spirits: he had only once lapsed from the path of sobriety, and then had shown himself truly penitent and anxious to fall in with anything his sister might suggest to assist in his endeavour to keep straight.

Major Evans, meanwhile, had gone to Mount Abato: his splendid constitution was asserting itself, and helping him to throw off the bad effects of his terrible illness.

When Tom Tremaine told him awkwardly the result of his interview with Flora, he was relieved yet perplexed, and began to think that the whole thing was even more serious than he had at first supposed. He was comfortably off, and did not love money for itself: it seemed simple to allow

this wife of his two hundred a-year, and so free himself from a grave responsibility. Also it would have given her—as he thought—what she desired, a small income entirely in her own hands and independent of her brother.

Her persistent refusal to see him, and the fact that she had consented to borrow money of his friend (for he drew this from the reluctant Tom), irritated him slightly; but he said to himself that there was no understanding women, and soon forgot his worries in the fresh loveliness of the hills, and in the hope of before long being equal to a little shooting.

Gurmpore was not a talking place. People there were inclined to let their neighbours alone; but of course they wondered, and gave vent to their wonder. It was said, certainly, that Mrs Evans had been sent home for her health's sake by the doctors, and that they had naturally not allowed her husband to accompany her to Bombay; nevertheless, the whole thing was strange, very strange, and no doubt something as yet unknown lay behind it.

Sister Pretty wrote to Mrs Latour at Simla, and, in spite of the charms of beautiful hill-captains, of Annandale and viceregal festivities, the fair lady was dumb with horror for two days,

during which her friends noticed her depression and irritability with concern. After that she reached the stage when speech consoled her, and told the story to every one, declaring that she always knew the girl to be a designing minx; but how such a frump could have succeeded in capturing the handsome hard-hearted Major was absolutely incomprehensible. It all came of that dreadful hot weather in the plains, when the few people left were thrown together, and became so stupid that they could not tell a rose from a cabbage. Of course he would find out his mistake very soon, and from what she heard it seemed as if the disillusioning process had already begun.

Flora and her brother had promised (on their way down to Bombay) to stay with some remote Scotch cousins, Sir George Campbell and his wife. He was a captain in the horse artillery, and quartered then at Muttiabad.

Lady Puff, as her intimate friends called her (Puff being Sir George's nickname), was a small thin woman with a worn sweet face. She enjoyed a well-deserved popularity: too well-born to be afraid of her social inferiors, and possessed of a large heart, she looked on the "summer side of doubt" in her dealings with others.

Dick was anxious for some last games of polo with friends of his at Muttiabad, who had promised to lend him ponies, and when the Campbells heard of this they at once insisted upon "putting up" their cousins.

"You dear things, how tired you must be!" Lady Puff said, as she met them at the station; "this is really delightful of you, and it is quite exciting to have a bride staying in the house. I only wish your husband was here—Puff knows him, and loves him dearly."

She was disappointed, however, with Flora, and puzzled, for she gained no assistance in her sympathetic endeavour to have "a good talk about it all." She had heard of the romantic marriage, and that the doctors had prescribed a voyage and English air for the bride, and was brimming over with compassion and interest.

"There's something wrong, Puff," she announced the very next morning after their arrival. "Are you sure that he is a very nice man? It may be that she's miserable at being away from him; but I can't get her to talk of him to me."

"He's a first-rate chap; why should she talk of him?" Sir George was big, silent, good-natured.

"Oh, you dear old stupid! you don't understand women. Why, when we were first married, and you went away to Okehampton for a week —do you remember?—I bored every one to distraction by talking about you all day long."

"You will have to get your trousseau when you are in England," she said to Flora one day; "I never heard of a wedding without a trousseau, or without presents for that matter," and then she and Sir George gave her a pretty Indian necklace of topazes and pearls.

"I don't think he can be a very thoughtful man, Puff," was the next comment; "to give her no engagement-ring or anything else of the kind. I never saw a girl so entirely without vanity. She ought to be quite good-looking; I long to dress her."

"I call her decidedly good-looking," said Sir George, who had taken a fancy to Flora. "She's like her mother's people; but Dick is a Niel to the tips of his fingers."

"And the old place is gone altogether?"

"Oh yes, absolutely; a Glasgow merchant bought it. Poor Richard! he was a fine-looking fellow; but he drank like a fish, and came to grief utterly. This boy seems all right."

Dick had made a favourable impression. His

sister watched him anxiously; but he was at his best, boyish, happy, captivating, affectionate to her, and bent on enjoying himself in a blameless way. Her spirits rose, and for the first time for many days the cloud of despondency and depression which hung round her cleared a little. Certainly he had more than once remained absolutely steady for a long while, then a reaction had set in: she was sanguine, however, and looked forward to a complete cure.

The companionship of a charming woman like Lady Campbell would have been very congenial but for the embarrassment she occasioned Flora day after day by references to her husband, and from the fact that she naturally supposed her to be heartbroken at having to separate from him so soon after her marriage.

"All the same, you dear," she would say consolingly, "you are terribly thin and white. No doubt the doctors are right, and nothing but a trip home and the voyage will set you up. I am even more sorry for poor Major Evans (Cousin Hugh, we shall have to call him, I suppose) than I am for you. I daresay you think Puff very quiet and undemonstrative; but I assure you he is quite lost without me, and mopes—oh, you'd hardly know him. That is partly the reason—

only you mustn't tell—that I have always stayed in the plains as yet: you see I am very strong, and don't mind it."

No presentiments of misfortune came to trouble Flora, no Balnaggan banshee shrieked outside her window at night, yet the great unexpected fell suddenly like a bolt from the blue.

One afternoon Dick Niel went as usual to play polo with his friends: before leaving he strolled into the drawing-room, where Flora was sitting alone, and asked her to sew on a button that was loose. She and Lady Campbell were to go down later to the ground to watch the game. As he reached the door he turned, and with a sudden impulse came back and kissed her.

"Cheer up, old girl," he said, as if a certain sadness in her face struck him for the first time. It was not his habit to think much of other people's affairs, and he readily accepted explanations, but lately he had begun to realise that all was not as it should be. He did not, however, think of questioning his sister, who was accustomed to go her own way. She and Evans had quarrelled, no doubt; but "Flo" was "so close," it was useless trying to sound her.

Flora gazed at him proudly: he looked handsome and bright, and she walked into the ver-

andah and watched him ride away with a whoop and merry backward glance.

She never saw him again alive. An hour later Sir George Campbell galloped hurriedly back, and reached the door of the bungalow just as the ladies were starting.

All unconscious of any ill, they stood together on the doorstep in their habits, laughing, and talking to the ponies.

Sir George flung himself from the saddle and whispered something to his wife. In a moment Flora was on the alert: the circumstances of her life had made her keenly sensitive. A glance at her cousin's face, the break in his voice as he murmured a smothered aside, and she felt that she knew the worst.

She turned and faced them.

"Something has happened — he is dead — I know it."

It had been a case of young players and untrained ponies — an old story: a collision, and he had fallen on his head.

They brought him back, laid him on his bed, and left them alone. She knelt at his side dry-eyed, with his poor cold hand in hers, as she had on the night of her marriage: her heart was like

a stone, her mind unable to understand or grasp the truth.

A happy smile still lingered on his face. Everything had happened so suddenly: into the midst of the vigorous healthy enjoyment, death and silence had come swift as an arrow, and Dick Niel, with all his faults and weaknesses, had gone where the curse of heredity could never trouble him more.

"He would have conquered; he tried so hard, he would have conquered," Flora cried to herself, as if defying an unspoken accusation: just then the suggestion that he was safe for ever from the power of temptation would not have consoled her.

After a time Lady Puff led her away gently, gathering her in her arms with a silent sympathy. She knew that words were useless at such a time, and her quiet confidence that her compassion would be acceptable made it so.

Later on she proposed telegraphing to Major Evans.

"He must come: he will help you to bear it, dearie."

"Oh no, no; he—he has been ill, he is shooting——"

"Shooting! He won't think of that, I should hope. I am sure men are selfish enough without encouragement: we mustn't make them more so. I can quite well manage to put him up."

The girl's persistent "Don't send for him, please," perplexed the kind little woman: she thought her dazed and hardly conscious of what she was saying, yet did not like deliberately to go against her wishes.

It never occurred to her, however, that her husband might possibly act without first consulting her; therefore, when Sir George calmly announced that he had telegraphed to Evans and received a reply saying he would arrive on the following afternoon, she did not quite know how to break the news to Flora, who was very quiet and brave, but overwhelmed by the terrible feeling of loss and emptiness that comes when life has to go on as before without the sound of a well-known voice and the presence of one who has seemed indispensable.

CHAPTER IX.

JIMMIE EVANS was a youth of twenty-two, endowed with irrepressible spirits: the baby of the family, who, having lost both his parents when quite a boy, looked upon his elder brother Hugh as a prodigious piece of perfection, a model of all that was grand and splendid. Of course he considered him very old, and at times, almost without allowing it to himself, felt that in certain matters connected with clothes, modern notions, &c., he could not expect him to be quite "up-to-date." Nevertheless, in spite of shortcomings of this nature, he remained his hero, most especially where military matters were concerned.

Jimmie was in the Welsh Regiment, and great had been his delight when it was sent to India, and he found himself within a reasonable distance of Gurmpore.

He only heard how near his adored brother

had been to death when the worst was over. He and a first cousin and devoted friend, Bob Vaughan, who had "joined" at the same time, were together in the Kashmir mountains beyond the reach of news; therefore the letter summoning him to Gurmpore reached him at the same time as several others telling of Major Evans' gradual recovery and convalescence.

It was with great pride that he received his brother at Mount Abato, where a portion of his regiment was stationed: in writing he assured Tom Tremaine that he intended to take the invalid thoroughly in hand and look after him well.

Needless to remark, no mention had been made in Tremaine's letters of the strange marriage which had taken place. The burden of many difficulties had fallen on his shoulders; but he left his friend to surmount this one alone.

Therefore when Hugh Evans descended from the mail-*tonga*[1] at Mount Abato and saw the slight, tall, fair-headed figure of his young brother awaiting him, with a face brimming over with smiles, and behind him Bob Vaughan, his merry brown eyes twinkling, he felt that the situation was, to say the least of it, embarrassing.

[1] A low two-wheeled carriage.

"How can I possibly have been such an infernal fool?" he thought, as he had many a time; but although you may confess your imbecility to yourself, it is not easy to disclose it to an adoring junior, who has been in the habit of considering you far beyond the reach of human weakness.

Jimmie grew sober when he caught sight of his brother's thin pale face and wasted form; and as they walked up to his quarters, he gulped down a lump in his throat and subdued a burning sensation behind the eyeballs, allowing Bob to do the talking, a privilege not often accorded that young gentleman.

But the delight of showing his quarters, offering hospitality, and recounting shooting experiences in Kashmir soon changed matters, and Jimmie chattered volubly. Bob meanwhile poured out tea, shouted to the servants, brought the kettle, and made himself generally useful; glancing at his friend for orders, which were delivered in lordly fashion, interspersed with a "Thanks, old chap," and a nod of approval now and then.

How should he tell them? Hugh Evans was not good at lying. That night he was sent to bed early by Jimmie, and he lay awake thinking.

How should he tell them? He must not compromise her, that was certain; yet he was anxious not to "give himself away" either. The first sense of the gravity of it all having passed, the fact that he had made a hopeless fool of himself seemed the most bitter part. Many ideas came to him: one was to boldly affect the loving husband, pretend despair at enforced separation, and airily mention that these things happened very quickly sometimes; from which Jimmie might infer that his absence in Kashmir had been the cause of his having been kept in the dark.

But, as I have said, Hugh Evans was not good at lying. In the early morning, when the two young fellows appeared with the *chota hazri*[1] and sat gazing at him as he lay back on his pillows, he said suddenly—

"I say, boys, I want to tell you something. Prepare for a shock; I'm married—there, you've got it now."

For a moment Jimmie stared at him blankly, suspecting a joke; but probably something in his brother's face made him realise that this was no joking matter.

"I'm blowed!" he said, awestruck.

[1] Little breakfast—an early meal.

"Great Scot!" ejaculated Bob.

"Who is it?" was the next question.

"A Miss Niel; I don't think you have ever seen her."

"Good Lord!"

"She lived with her brother at Gurmpore."

"Great Scotty! but why didn't you tell me?"

"My dear boy, you were in Kashmir——"

"Yes; but——"

"Well, it's just this; no one knew, and—er—then I got ill, and it had to be hurried on——"

"Oh, I see; but somehow I never imagine you falling in love with any one—do you, Bob? I thought you despised the fair sex: you've often called me a young ass because——"

"My dear chap, that's different—a man must marry some time. I tell you candidly this is a sensible thing, a—an arrangement, in fact——"

"Good Lord!"

"Indeed—I wish you boys wouldn't laugh—I don't mind telling you that through my being ill and she being ill—I mean her brother—no, she being ill—she has been obliged to go off with him to England, and—er—so couldn't come here with me. D'you see? Funny, isn't it?"

"Deuced funny."

"If you go on like that, I'll spank you."

Jimmie had thrown himself on the ground, and was now sitting there, indulging in a series of weird gymnastics that can only be described as whirligigs; while, with two fingers in his mouth, he gave vent to loud and vulgar whistles worthy of a London gutter boy.

Bob gazed at him admiringly, and rocked his chair backwards and forwards. Hugh tried to look grave, and to assume the dignity suitable to an elder brother; but the sight of Jimmie's gyrating form on the floor proved too much for him: the corners of his mouth relaxed, and presently all three were in fits of resounding laughter.

It certainly was good to laugh, to feel young again and stronger, and to enjoy day by day the companionship of two such lively, ingenious imps. Hugh Evans had never dwelt with pleasure on the more serious things of life, and the troubles he had lately so involuntarily brought upon himself had preyed upon his mind and depressed him in a most unusual manner. He was only too thankful to throw them off, to forget them, and enjoy freedom from responsibility. To do him justice, he tried his best to stop the boys' constant and mischievous allusions to his

marriage; but the laughter in which he had weakly allowed himself to indulge the first day had been unfortunate, and moreover his sense of humour still played him tricks, and prevented his obtaining any success when he attempted to remonstrate.

Some very pleasant people were at Mount Abato for the hot weather, and Jimmie introduced his handsome brother with great pride.

"Mrs Baines asked me if you were a married man," he said one day, "and upon my word I nearly blurted out 'Yes,' that you were on your honeymoon."

"You young devil!"

"Oh, but I remembered in time, and said solemnly, with a touch of sadness in my voice —didn't I, Bob? although you kept blinking your eyes at me all the time, you villain! — that you had been married a very short time, and were heartbroken at being separated from your young wife; but she was ill—or was it the brother who was ill? Mrs Baines, the humbug, said sentimentally, 'I thought he looked sad'; and then that ass Blunt came and spoilt it all by remarking, 'Do you? I think he looks as jolly as a sand-boy.' It's about true all the same."

Yet in spite of his nonsense Jimmie was well able to uphold his brother's reputation, and Evans was astonished to find that he possessed a far greater talent for the creation of polite fiction than he had ever laid claim to. Indeed, more than once, when an officious stranger would inquire for Mrs Evans, Jimmie answered with such perfect ease and confidence, and at times exhibited such an astonishing knowledge of Flora's whereabouts and characteristics, that he could only remain silent—his feelings divided between a desire to shake his young brother and an inclination to laugh.

Into the midst of this lazy careless life came Sir George Campbell's telegram:—

"Poor Dick Niel killed at polo here yesterday; come to your wife, who is with us."

With consternation Hugh Evans gazed at the paper before him and read the words over more than once. At first he could only think of Dick, the poor weak boy who had shown a curious affection and admiration for himself. Then he remembered Flora, and realised more fully what the telegram meant. "Your wife:" the words startled him. Yes, she was his wife, and, but for him, alone in the world; he must go to her. He did not hesitate: it was

his duty, and one he had from the beginning determined not to shirk. But this was most unexpected. He recalled her extraordinary obstinacy in connection with the money, and her unalterable resolve not to see him; then again he thought of her devoted love for her brother, and assumed that sorrow had broken down her resolutions and caused her to change her mind; or maybe she considered him the proper person to arrange any business matters that might require looking after, as indeed he now was.

"I wish old Tom was here," he reflected with a sigh of perplexity.

Jimmie entering saw a very long face; he read the telegram.

"Must you go? She's with friends, I suppose?" By this time the boy had made a pretty shrewd guess that whatever had brought about the "arrangement" alluded to, "old Hugh" was by no means pining for his wife's society.

"I must go," said his brother decidedly. "She's with cousins, I believe; but I am going. It's precious hard on the poor girl; she was tremendously fond of him."

"Poor chap!" Jimmie knew that further words were useless; he was silent.

The journey from Mount Abato to Muttiabad

was a long one: by leaving at once Hugh Evans could only reach there three days after poor Dick's tragic death.

"I shall start early to-morrow morning," he continued after a pause; "it's too late to go to-day."

"What shall you do afterwards? come back here and bring her?"

"I suppose so."

His tone and general aspect were so dismal and unlike his usual self that the irrepressible Jimmie's mouth twitched.

"Cheer up," he remarked gravely, biting his lip. "We will give you a good send-off, a champagne supper——" then forgetting the sad news he had just heard, his spirits got the better of him, and he burst out laughing.

But this time his brother would not respond; he began to pace up and down the room.

"Don't be a fool," he said rather crossly; "you don't seem to realise that I knew the poor fellow well."

"Yes. Upon my soul I'm awfully sorry; but you looked so comic—not at all like a man on his honeymoon."

"I'm not on my honeymoon, thank the Lord! —I didn't mean that—— Well, Jimmie boy, I

don't mind telling you the real state of the case; I think you are safe. You see the circumstances are peculiar, owing to the fact that I was ill — that she was ill — and had to go away—— Oh, I can't explain it all. I haven't seen her since the marriage. It was decided that—I'm in the devil of a fix, and there's the truth—I don't know how to meet her."

The young fellow was serious at once, and assumed an air of responsibility, not to say importance: it dawned upon him that his brother was indirectly asking his help in a difficulty. "Old Hugh" had never been very "'cute" about women.

"Oh, as to that, don't worry yourself," he said, with the air of one who knows what he is talking about; "you'll find that easy enough."

"I'll be hanged if I shall——"

"When you get there they'll probably let you see her alone—they'll think it the proper thing, don't you know—well, then, you go in and say nothing about the brother, or else she'll cry, but just kiss her and you'll find it's all right."

"I'm not so sure of that."

"Oh yes, women always like being kissed, although they may pretend to be angry—ask Bob —besides, she is your wife."

"Ye-es."

"And she will want comforting."

"Oh, you seem to be well up in women's ways."

Jimmie felt flattered.

"It's instinct," he answered modestly, accepting what he considered a compliment, and ignoring the satire.

"May I tell Bob?" he asked presently.

"Well, it's useless saying No: he doesn't jabber; but mind, not a word against her. She's"—searching for inspiration, and recalling some of Tom's remarks—"she's as proud as Lucifer—and, er—rides splendidly."

The two boys talked long and sagely together over their cigarettes, and adopted Dr O'Brien's opinion that old Hugh had been "let in" somehow, though, of course, he would sooner die than allow it. Bob's large eyes grew solemn and pathetic, and Jimmie became red with anger and excitement as he thought of all the charming girls his brother might have married, and how few were worthy of him.

"If I had been there it shouldn't have happened," he said in conclusion with happy self-confidence. "We must do our best to cheer him up."

And perhaps a desire to raise Hugh Evans' spirits was the indirect cause of various steeplechases on chairs and other astonishing horse-play which took place after mess that night: they were instigated apparently by a quiet shy subaltern. Bob was not far off, however, and his eyes twinkled suspiciously as he watched the fun.

The youngsters, with whom Major Evans had become very popular, all knew that he was leaving the next day, but were very vague as to the reason of his departure; therefore they wished him good luck and a prosperous journey, and drank his health boisterously, ending by hoisting him on their shoulders and marching round the room with him, to the strains of "He's a jolly good fellow," sung slightly regardless of harmony in lusty youthful voices. Their vigorous cheers awoke the fair Mrs Baines from her first sleep in her bungalow a quarter of a mile away.

"By Jove! it was positively indecent; the poor chap actually my brother-in-law," Hugh Evans reflected when he reached his own room at a very late hour. "What could I do? I'd bet a fiver those rascals Jimmie and Bob were at the bottom of it, although they did look so demure, and had to be persuaded to join. Mercifully she will never hear of it."

On the following morning, when the first sun-rays touched the mountain peaks, and their gigantic hollows still lay in darkness, the two boys walked down to see Evans off.

"You'll come back?" asked Jimmie, rather gloomily.

Subdued, and suffering slightly from the effects of the last night's revel, he felt just then as if he were losing father, mother, brother, sister, everything.

"Oh yes, my boy; you'll have me back again before long, with or without! You've made me too jolly comfortable, and won't get rid of me so easily: besides, I want to have a shot at a leopard."

"Yes, you'll be up to it by that time; but I wish you weren't obliged to go down to that confounded Muttiabad in the heat before you are quite fit." Here Jimmie resumed his grandfatherly air.

"Never mind, it won't kill me," said his brother, and then a gleam of amusement crept into his eyes. The situation was altogether too funny: a sense of humour had always been strong, almost to a fault, in the Evans family.

Jimmie caught the look, it touched him like an electric spark; the laughter began again, "for no

reason at all." Certainly his spirits never flagged for long. And, after all, he still had his "own familiar friend." Hugh Evans watched them as they stood side by side waving to him, a comely pair of young Britons.

"Ruffians both of them," he said, and laughed again as the *tonga* with its galloping ponies swept him from their sight, and he was left to face the problem in front of him alone.

CHAPTER X.

In the afternoon of the day on which her husband was expected, Lady Campbell told Flora that she must not be surprised to see him at any moment. She was sitting in her room with her hands before her, and started up, her face full of consternation, then sank back wearily. What did it matter? Nothing mattered now—nothing!

Hugh Evans, arriving an hour later, was considerably disconcerted by the cordial welcome he received, as if from relations. It was evident that these kind people knew nothing of the real state of affairs.

"She is in her room, poor darling! Won't you come and see her?" Lady Campbell said. "She will get better now you are here; she is so brave, and didn't want us to send for you—she said the journey would knock you up or something of that kind——"

Evans was visibly embarrassed.

"I—perhaps she is asleep—I won't disturb her——"

He then explained that he had promised to stay with a friend of his, a Captain Brook, in the 3rd Bengal Cavalry.

"I'll creep softly in and prepare her," suggested Lady Puff, "in case it should be too great a surprise." She did not know that the Major, whose fine figure and frank handsome face impressed her very favourably, was feeling more uncomfortable than he had ever felt in his life.

Flora grew white; she drew a long breath, put her hand over her eyes, and bit her lip. Fate had been too strong for her, and she knew that she must see him at last, that she could no longer avoid a meeting.

"Tell him to go into George's writing-room and I will come," she said presently, her voice trembling a little.

"I know so well what you feel, dear," whispered Lady Puff, kissing her; "it will bring it all back at first."

A few minutes later the girl walked quietly into a large bare room used by Sir George as a study. She looked very pale, and did not raise her eyes.

Hugh Evans was standing near the window. At the sight of her in her black dress all re-

collection of Jimmie's sage advice vanished: he remembered nothing for the moment but the sorrow through which she had passed. He went up to her and took her hand.

"I am so very, very sorry — I can't tell you how sorry I am. Upon my word I couldn't believe it when I heard. I—I wish old Tom was here." It was all he could think of to say.

She glanced up at him for a moment, and answered almost mechanically, "Thank you—but there is a great deal to be thankful for. He never knew; he wasn't conscious; he was spared all that——"

"So Campbell said. He telegraphed to me, and I—I came. I thought perhaps I might—help you in some way—see after things. You will let me know if I can?"

He was shy, awkward, unlike himself; but the paralysing effect of a great trouble made Flora calm and apathetic.

"Thank you," she repeated. "I wanted to tell you that I didn't know they had sent for you—I am so sorry. I didn't find it out in time to—to stop you——"

"Campbell telegraphed. I thought perhaps you — I mean — I hope you are not — not annoyed?"

"No, oh no. I—I think it was very kind of you, and I am so sorry—the long journey can't have been good——"

"I'm wonderfully fit, thank God!"

She looked at him then, quickly, furtively, and was astonished at the change a few weeks had wrought. The colour had come to his face again, the strength and vigour to his limbs.

Evans did not notice her glance. Silence ensued, and he gazed from the window, hoping for inspiration; it was not easy to talk jerkily about everything but what was uppermost in the mind of each.

Presently he turned round, and went a step nearer to her, rapidly and impulsively—

"Miss Niel" — the name slipped out; he stopped short and reddened like a boy. "I beg your pardon—I mean, er—I want to say something to you. It is of no use speaking of what is past and over, but—you are alone now—I hope —my home is yours—you understand—I am not good at expressing myself."

The colour rushed to Flora's wan cheeks, a painful burning blush that crept to her ears and neck. She covered her face with her hands, then answered in a strangled voice—

"Oh don't—don't! It is very good of you. I

—I am grateful, but I can't. I—my cousins have asked me to stay here——"

He watched her curiously.

"They don't seem to know—you haven't told them?"

"No; no one knows but—Mr Tremaine."

"I wish old Tom was here."

"I wish he was."

Once more an awkward pause, into which came the welcome sound of a little tinkling gong that announced dinner. They hailed with relief the conventionalities of society, although in this case society consisted only of Sir George and his wife.

"He is very charming, but undoubtedly there is something wrong," remarked Lady Puff that night.

"I don't see why," said her husband. "They seem very fond of one another!"

"Oh, you blind old bat!—if you had treated me with such—such exquisite politeness when we were first married, I—well—I would have tried for a divorce—there!"

Major Evans managed all his wife's affairs, assisted by Sir George Campbell. Having come to Muttiabad, he was thankful to be of use. Flora had little or no trouble: with her own small income, and what had belonged to Dick, she possessed enough to live upon.

There was not much to be done, and her good-natured, short-sighted cousin made an excellent go-between. Even he, however, began to think his wife must be correct in her suspicions, and could not help noticing that the girl seemed far less stiff and reserved when dealing with him than she was in her husband's presence.

"It is funny how little he knows of her affairs," he remarked. "Of course it was too hurried for there to be settlements, and the poor chap thought he was dying. But he doesn't realise anything about her family, hadn't even heard that the doctors were supposed to have ordered her a voyage: in fact, from one or two things he has let drop, I rather gather it must have been for the poor boy's sake they were going home. That would account for her wish to stay out here now. Who has she to go to after all? No one but old Cousin Angus M'Pherson, and he never forgave her mother for marrying a Niel."

"I shall assume it is all right," said Lady Puff; "that is the best way. What would be more natural than for her to go back to Mount Abato with him, yet apparently such a thing is not thought of. I hinted at it the other day; but he quickly turned the subject, and looked so uncomfortable that I didn't dare touch on it again. As

for Flora, she only asks to stay with us; and I am sure, poor darling, we are glad enough to have her."

Circumstances obliged Evans and Flora to meet daily, and they treated each other with constrained politeness. When their kindly-intentioned hostess left them alone together, either he or she soon found an excuse for beating a retreat. It happened that the Major was very much occupied while in Muttiabad with some mysterious business, about which he was liable to be summoned away at any moment. In fact, he took the opportunity of investigating a small matter connected with his work, and blessed the excuse it provided.

He did not venture to repeat what he had said to Flora the first evening—her words and manner remained in his recollection and restrained him: he could scarcely explain to himself the impression they had left, a feeling that further reference to the subject would wound and insult her.

Yet it was a strange situation, and a very awkward one. He was thankful when the week dragged to an end, and he prepared to start again for Mount Abato.

The last evening Lady Campbell suddenly stopped her pony-cart about a mile from home

and asked them to return without her, as she wished to drive round another way to leave a message she had forgotten.

They walked on in silence for a few minutes, then he laughed suddenly and said—

"Lady Campbell thinks me a brute." His sense of humour was beginning to assert itself.

"I am sure she doesn't——"

"It is only a very natural conclusion—you must allow that our position is rather a false one."

"I am so sorry you came."

She was distressed, and totally unaware that her words must sound ungracious.

He looked at her quickly, scarcely knowing whether to smile or frown. Had he cared more he might have lost his temper. As it was, he replied with a slight touch of sarcasm—

"It is lucky I have not a particularly good opinion of myself, or I—might feel offended at that remark."

Flora turned, her face full of concern: undoubtedly the events of the last few months had softened and subdued her.

"Oh, you know I don't mean that. I can't thank you enough. I was thinking of you—I am sorry to have brought it on you—to have been

the cause. I—I wanted you to understand that —that I wished all to be as if it had never been——"

"As you see, the world won't allow that."

She did not answer, but walked on slowly, her eyes on the ground, and presently said in a low voice—

"If you will let me, I am going to tell Katie Campbell everything: she—they—are to be trusted. As for other people, it doesn't matter what they say: they will only believe we have quarrelled, and soon forget us altogether."

"Do you think I like it to be supposed that I neglect my wife?"

It was the first time he had thus spoken of her: the name sounded as strange to him as it did to Flora, who was stung into antagonism at once. The old strong pride had not stirred within her since Dick's death.

"Oh, is it impossible to find some flaw, some way out of it?" she cried, her colour rising.

"Impossible, as far as I can see—unless I beat you or bolt with some one. But being a fairly respectable member of society, I haven't the slightest intention of doing either."

Suddenly the compassion he had always felt for her came back: at that moment she was so like a

trapped creature fighting for freedom. The sarcastic tone died out of his voice—

"Look here, Miss Niel—er—I mean Flora—why not make the best of a bad business? It can't be altered. Suppose we allow that we were two fools, but why should we quarrel? People may say if they like that we are modern and prefer going our own separate roads; but let us be good friends at any rate, and if only you would allow me to give you enough to—you will have so little——"

"No, no; please say nothing about money—I can't bear it—I would sooner beg my bread—I would rather——" she broke off, clasped her hands together, then placing them on her breast, breathed hard, trying to control her excitement and to regain composure. When she spoke at last she was calm and collected.

"I wanted to tell you what I am going to do: I heard from Sister Pretty a few days ago. She is in Kashmir, in the little hospital at Islamabad—and I have made up my mind to join her. I wrote to-day."

"Do you like nursing? Have you ever done any of that sort of work? You don't look very strong."

She smiled and thought, "Thank God, no one has betrayed me."

"I have done a certain amount of it at different times, and I like it."

He was at a loss to understand the look she gave him, and puzzled over it as they walked in at the Campbells' gate. He wondered if she had thought his questions indicated a doubt of her talents as a sick-nurse.

Lady Puff was quite pleased with her manœuvres, and the next day suggested as a matter of course that Flora should drive her husband to the station. The girl made no demur: the thought of having to bid him good-bye under her cousin's eyes had haunted her. Besides, both he and she had learnt during the last week the necessity of trying to "keep up appearances" as far as possible. As usual they spoke little; but when they drew near the station he asked—

"Have you thought over what I said about being good friends? Do you agree?"

"Ye-es."

"Will you promise me something, then?"

"What is it?"

"Will you remember that if you want to go to Gurmpore at any time, my bungalow is there empty, with all the servants, and you have only to send word that you are coming? Will you promise that if you are in any difficulty or trouble

you will let me know? Come; I'm sure you are straight, and if you promise you won't break your word."

"You are very kind——" she began.

"I am not asking you out of kindness; you have never accepted the smallest favour from me yet, but you are going to promise me this. Recollect, I have given in to you in everything: I intend to have my way now."

He spoke cheerfully and kindly, but with great decision: she hardly realised what a strange and unusual experience it was to a man accustomed to having his own way, to be consistently contradicted and opposed.

He was right in supposing that a promise was sacred to her: she shook her head slowly, knowing what that promise entailed.

He said no more just then; but when they reached the station he got out of the cart, gave a few directions, and then turned back and held out his hand.

"You are going to promise," he said, looking her straight in the face, "or I shall never believe in your friendship."

"Very well."

"Repeat it after me—*I promise.*"

"I promise."

"Thank you. Good-bye; remember."

"Good-bye."

Before she could say another word he had gone. She watched his tall soldierly figure disappear in the crowd, and her lips parted with a dreary smile. He was so cheerful, so glad to go; and he looked so young, a man whom a girl of nineteen might make an ideal of. Yet he was tied to her, a woman of twenty-nine, who had not only passed her youth—she told herself—but who had grown old and sad through a premature knowledge of "the seamy side."

How generous he had been, never showing for one moment that he despised her for what she had done, placing himself in an embarrassing position, because he felt it right so to do. He loved no woman now; but might not the time come? And then——? She went to her room when she got back, and sat for some time, with her head in her hands, thinking deeply. Scamp, who was to have been left with the Campbells, jumped on her lap and lay curled up like a fried whiting, but happy at being in such near vicinity to his mistress.

So Lady Puff found her, and she kissed her and cried a little, and called her a dear thing.

"She certainly is very sorry to lose him," she

said that night. "But although he's charming, and good-looking, and all that, I don't think it is very nice of him not to give her any pretty things."

The next day Flora told her the truth—that is to say, as far as she could do so without implicating her brother. Dick's health had been at the bottom of it all: she had worried, had been in a state almost bordering on insanity, the heat made people irresponsible, &c. Flora found it a difficult story to tell; but she did not spare herself, and spoke in her old, sharp, hard tone. Lady Campbell, however, guessed a good deal, and silently filled up the gaps in the narrative.

"And you never told him that you nursed him all that time?" she asked, astonished. "Why, it is the first thing I should have said: he would have been touched."

"I don't wish him to be touched. Besides, he would only have felt bored, and as if he ought to thank me."

She reluctantly repeated the words she had overheard on the night of her marriage, and which were indelibly imprinted on her brain.

"Oh, that was so like a sick man's irritability and fretfulness; he didn't mean it. I never heard a more extraordinary tale. I blame him very

much for asking such a thing; and having married you, he should certainly remember that you are his wife——"

"He does remember it: I wish he did not. It was my fault entirely—he is not to blame in the least. He came the whole way down from Mount Abato from a sense of duty and nothing else, and he—he did ask me to go——"

"To go back with him? And you refused?" the little lady interrupted impetuously. "My dear child, you *are* funny. If I was in love with such a dear handsome creature—why, I would run away with him without thinking twice."

"But I am not in love with him," said Flora drily.

"Then you ought to be——"

"I don't think I know how to fall in love; and as to good looks, I always like ugly men."

"What was the other man about—Mr Trelawney—Tremaine? I condemn him most of all; he ought to have known better."

"No, no!" the girl cried, with more warmth than she had yet shown; "you mustn't say a word against him—he is the best friend I have in the world."

"Is he ugly?"

"I don't know; I have never thought whether he is or not."

"Well, I am sure it will all come right in the end."

"Nothing can come right unless I die, and I don't see much chance of that. Life is so puzzling,—why was I left and Dick taken? How good you are to me, Katie; I wonder I have been able to tell you. I think it is because you are so unlike me—not hard. You look on the happy side of things, you don't despise me. God knows I despise myself."

"Nonsense, dearie. You are tired and overdone; you will think differently by-and-by."

"I shall never think differently," Flora answered dismally. Just then the slough of despond seemed closing over her; nothing but the affectionate womanly sympathy of her kind friend could have made her unbend and lighten her troubles by speaking of them. The thought of work, vigorous useful work, was the only star on her hopeless horizon.

Lady Puff repeated a modified edition of the story to her husband, and was vexed to find that he considered Evans and Flora quite right and wise in deciding to remain good friends, yet go their own ways.

"I don't agree with you at all!" she exclaimed. She was still suffering from the disappointment of not having discovered the real state of the case sooner, and felt sure that a few "nice talks" with Major Evans, and a little judicious advice, would have smoothed matters considerably.

"Much better leave them alone," said Sir George. He thought very highly of his wife's abilities, but rather dreaded her matchmaking propensities.

CHAPTER XI.

A FEW weeks later Flora went up to Kashmir and joined Sister Pretty at Islamabad. She was sorry to part from the Campbells. In spite of the cousinship their previous acquaintance had been slight, and but for the great trouble that had thrown them together, the girl might not have thawed as thoroughly as she did. For years she had closed up to those around her, and Tom Tremaine alone had been able to penetrate the armour of reserve which served as a protection against ill-advised curiosity and kindly intentioned but undesired attempts at intimacy.

Lady Puff won her heart at once. Perhaps a certain affinity between the two women was caused by the fact that their characters were absolutely different. Katherine Stuart's childhood had been much the same as Flora's, as far as circumstances went; but it continued as it had begun, surrounded by the happiness and love that

falls to the share of the British child who possesses brothers and sisters, and grows up in the wholesome tranquillity of a comfortable country home. Many wondered that she could make up her mind to leave it; but when she was only twenty-two George Campbell appeared on the scene, and to her own astonishment she went willingly, and found her new life as happy as, if not happier than, the old one had been. She was an optimist by nature, and even the death of her little child had only helped her to understand more fully the troubles of others, and to strengthen the supreme gift of sympathy which belonged to her.

Flora, on the other hand, was endowed with the intellectual temperament and a vivid imagination which left her no peace. Had she been asked why she cultivated reserve, she would have said, "My affairs are my own; no one wishes to know about them, and, therefore, why should I discuss them?" Only in the last few months had she begun to understand that in some cases silence is impossible; that to speak to a tried and trusted friend of what is nearest your heart lightens a burden which seems too heavy to bear.

Nevertheless she welcomed the freshness of Kashmir with thankfulness: she was not at all

strong, the strain and trouble had told on her, and she had found the damp heat extremely trying.

That she was as yet unfit for work Sister Pretty soon discovered, and suggested a week at Gulmurg, a high-lying plateau about 10,000 feet above the level of the sea.

The nurse was not a person whom Flora would naturally have selected as a companion; but she was grateful for her kindness, and accepted her proposal to accompany her with a certain thankfulness. It was terrible to feel so utterly alone; and even this rather common, egotistical, little person's interest in her welfare was welcome. They hired tents and coolies, and started from the river in dandies, across flower-strewn mosquito-haunted plains, and through woods of colossal pines, which seemed to belong to a world of giants, so magnificent were their proportions and their sweeping tracery of boughs. The brown good-natured Kashmiris groaned and sang, climbing like goats up the steep ascent. Half-way, tents were pitched for the night; but in the early morning they moved on again, and before many hours reached the lovely "meadow of roses" (Gulmurg), which lay like a green luxuriant basin among the fir-woods, its grass fresh and dewy,

spangled with myriads of flowers, and its little stream shining and dancing in the sun as it wound its way amid the cool meadows.

Hazim, a trustworthy and self-important bearer who had been lent by a friend, soon discovered a suitable spot for the tents on the summit of a little knoll, and Scamp hunted field-mice at the edge of the river with some excitement.

"This is really jolly!" Sister Pretty said; "and you, Mrs Evans, shall go to bed for two days and just lie in your tent and look down the valley; that will provide you with sufficient amusement."

Flora was nothing loth. The peace of the sunny smiling valley descended on her, and she was thankful to rest. So she lay with the curtains of her tent open and breathed in the fresh pure air, which brought new life to one who had just passed through a "hot weather" in the plains.

Below, in the low-lying fields, she could see people playing golf; and beyond, nearer the jagged pine-tree fringe outlined against the sky, a brown village of log-huts nestled. White tents were dotted here and there, some amongst the trees and others on grassy hillocks; and the gentle meek-eyed cows, with quaint little humps on their backs, grazed in the pastures.

Sister Pretty soon discovered some friends, men

she had nursed at different times. She smoked cigarettes, gossipped and flirted to her heart's content, and the sound of joking and laughter brought a pang of remembrance to Flora: she thought of the picnic in the Banker's gardens, and of Mrs Latour and Dick. She pondered over the events of that night and Evans' share in the proceedings, then recalled his look as she spoke of the money, and said to herself with a hot flush that mercifully he could no longer think her mercenary—he must know she had done all for Dick's sake. Yet, why should he know or care? He probably did not think about it.

After a little, friends of his found her out and came to call, sitting under the *shamiyana*[1] which represented dining-room and drawing-room, and singing his praises, which they naturally considered would be the form of conversation most acceptable to his wife. They thought her quiet and curiously reticent on the subject of her husband's movements, and wondered what "old Evans" could see in her, but remembered that she had lately lost her brother, and imagined the Major had sent her up to Kashmir with a sick nurse,—an explanation of the case which Sister Pretty under the circumstances would

[1] A flat-roofed tent without sides.

have slightly resented. It pleased her to be thought the friend of Mrs Evans. Formerly she had considered Miss Niel dowdy and unapproachable; but the romance of her marriage had transformed Flora in her eyes, and raised an interest which was perfectly genuine. She was a handsome girl, with the faults belonging to one type of her profession—a certain want of refinement, a happy confidence in herself and love of admiration (which induced her at times to touch up her eyelids with bistre), and a relish for gruesome hospital ancedotes. But her warm-heartedness and devotion during sickness redeemed all this, to say nothing of an undoubted talent for nursing.

She could not disguise her curiosity as regards Mrs Evans' relations with her husband, for it was evident that she received no letters from him and did not expect any. After a few unsuccessful attempts to discover the true state of the case, however, Sister Pretty ceased to allude to the subject, and drew her own conclusions. Any other woman might have considered that some sort of explanation was due to her; but Flora simply kept her counsel, and had a clever way of leading the nurse to talk of her own affairs whenever she approached dangerous ground.

Tom Tremaine was shooting ibex beyond Islamabad, and on his way back to Barramulla, having heard from Hugh Evans that Flora was in Kashmir, he found out her whereabouts, and rode up to Gulmurg on purpose to see her.

This visit was a most unexpected surprise and pleasure; and while Sister Pretty played golf or went out to tea, the two friends sat by the blazing fire—for the evenings were cold—and talked of many things.

For the first time Flora felt able to take comfort in the thought that her young brother was safe from the dangers of evil influence and the temptations that had beset her unhappy father. Tom never put forward his opinions aggressively: what he said came from his heart, and did not leave the impression that he was considering the most agreeable method of condolence. He rather shyly alluded to Hugh Evans, who, he informed her, had written to tell him of his stay at Muttiabad.

Flora bit her lip and gazed into the fire.

"It was very good of him," she said; "but I wished he had not come."

"You mean because you had made up your mind not to see him? You know I always told you that was a mistake——"

"I mean I don't wish him to feel for one moment that—that he owes me anything."

"Evans being what he is, you will never make him shirk his duty."

It was one of Tom's unlucky speeches.

"Duty! yes," she answered bitterly; "and don't you see that I know it is duty, and that therefore every good-natured act of his or kind word hurts me. I don't think I have much spirit left; but I would sooner be indebted to any one, to you of course, to Sister Pretty, to Mr Lox, to Mrs Latour even——"

"Don't say that: I had hoped when you met him at Muttiabad you would see what a splendid chap he is, and—would make it up."

"There is nothing to make up. I tell you he was very kind, and he *did his duty* like a brave man. Katie Campbell thinks him perfect, now that she knows the truth and has forgiven him for not having presented me with an engagement-ring. What is the use of talking about it? He was most polite, and called me Miss Niel, and we were extremely thankful to see the last of each other."

Tom sighed: he knew the mood that inspired her words so well, and in his pocket was a letter from his friend which proved them to be true.

"Upon my soul I was never so glad to get away from anywhere in my life," Hugh Evans wrote. "The Campbells are delightful; but they put me in a hat more than once by assuming that my devotion to my wife was as great as, if not greater than, theirs to each other! As for the lady in question, she is undoubtedly the strangest young woman I have met for many a long day. I felt very sorry for her, for she adored poor Dick; but I'll be hanged if I could make her out. As you say, she has a very devil of pride or obstinacy or something, and made me feel a fool more than once. Would you believe it, she got the better of me about the money. I was obliged to give in, and we ended with a species of armed neutrality, each to go his own way, to cease hostilities upon meeting,—an arrangement which is, after all, more sound than any other could be under the circumstances. I don't think I fancy myself particularly, Tom; but upon my word I never failed more signally in making a favourable impression. I confess to a certain human feeling that I should enjoy being even with her some day: meantime, if I judge her aright, she will keep a promise I wrung from her to send to me if in trouble, and to make use of the bungalow at Gurmpore (during your humble servant's absence, of course)

should she wish to go there. I hope you have got some ibex; I wish I was with you. I haven't been particularly lucky here; but the place has done me good, and I shall soon be able to walk as well as ever"—and so on.

Tom gazed down the valley and sighed again: darkness had fallen, and beyond the jagged fir-trees a great golden moon was rising slowly. Along the track by the stream a silent train of cattle wended its way homewards; in the distance the "Irish brigade" was apparently enjoying a pleasant evening, to judge from the clash and clatter of saucepans and tin baths which accompanied the noisy songs.

Sister Pretty's laugh close by, as she walked up the hill with a loquacious subaltern, came as a pleasant contrast. She was laden with books, chiefly by Ouida and John Strange Winter, which she had collected from various people. After a few minutes' conversation, Tom Tremaine said Good night, and climbed the slope to the wooden building amongst the trees which called itself a hotel.

Before he left, Flora gave him a cheque for the amount he had lent her. He looked at it sadly, as if he would gladly have torn it into small bits and scattered it to the winds;

but he merely folded it and placed it in his pocket-book.

"You are not kind to your friends," he said; and it was the only reproach he ever addressed to her. She smiled; the tears came into her eyes.

"I don't want it now, and you must forgive me: remember you are the only human being I have ever asked a favour of."

A week later (they had been able to prolong their holiday) she began work at Islamabad. The hospital, of which Sister Pretty had previously taken sole charge, in one way scarcely deserved the name. It had been newly established during the summer and autumn months to supply a want very much felt, and was supported by private subscriptions. The Mission Hospital at Srinagar was often full to overflowing; and it happened continually that travellers or men who had been shooting in the mountains, beyond the beautiful little town with its stately plane-trees and sacred tanks, came down there sick, and were only too thankful not to be obliged to proceed to the capital.

Four patients occupied the rooms or wards when Flora was first introduced to the primitive wooden house—two young civilians, a subaltern

in the Pioneers down with fever, and a Sapper captain who had been injured by a bear.

She soon began to take an interest in her new duties, and learnt a great deal from Sister Pretty. The two made a curious contrast. Flora found that her patients were inclined to place her on a pinnacle. They noticed the sadness in her face, and it touched them; then she looked particularly well in the grey dress and white cap and apron she had adopted; her movements were quiet and graceful. Sister Pretty, on the other hand, was lively and talkative; she treated them as children, scolded if they became obstreperous, laughing at their impatience of control, dancing a skirt-dance, singing a song to the banjo, or telling their fortunes when they were sufficiently well to require amusement. If they wished to speak of home and of serious things, they turned to Flora: those hours at her husband's bedside had taught her much. Some of her old acquaintances would hardly have recognised her.

But when Mrs M'Cormack and Sister Pretty met again, and the elder lady heard of the change, she merely remarked—

"I always told you she was one of the most unselfish women I had ever known. Major

Evans is a fortunate man, and has got more than he deserves."

"More than he deserves? What *do* you mean? Surely you don't know anything against him?"

"Oh dear no; he is a fine fellow, and handsome certainly—I admire a man with a square chin—but he wants weight."

CHAPTER XII.

When the autumn months had passed and it began to grow cold, the strangers departed, and the little hospital was no longer needed. Sister Pretty went back to Gurmpore, and Flora—after remaining some time with friends who lived the whole winter through near Srinagar—prepared to set out for Muttiabad, where she determined to take a small bungalow near the Campbells.

Before leaving Kashmir, however, she received an imploring letter from the nurse, who was ill, and feeling very disconsolate. She suggested that Flora should come herself to Gurmpore and collect the things she had stored and left with friends. She promised to get well at once if "dear Mrs Evans" would nurse her; Mrs M'Cormack was back and dying to see "Miss Niel" as she still persisted in calling her: the garden at Rosewood was looking beau-

tiful—it seemed quite sad that Major Evans had to be away so long on business.

Flora read the letter carefully, and thought about it all day. It was evident that her friends assumed she would go to her husband's bungalow: Sister Pretty made no mention of being able to put her up at the hospital, and Mrs M'Cormack sent no invitation.

In the evening she went out alone and wandered down to the Jhelum. The sky was full of yellow light, and the tall slim poplars loomed dark and sentinel-like beyond the gleaming river, their dusky reflections quivering in the swift current. Far away, mountains, woods, and stream faded into a blue haze; while in the near distance the water, pearl and amber, glistened and shone: the whole seemed a dream, mysterious and unreal.

She sat down on a log, her head on her hand, and listened to the wavelets lapping against a long reed-thatched house-boat which was moored to the bank. The voices of people walking towards the library, chattering and laughing, sounded across the silence, and she drew back into the shadow, desiring solitude.

What of her promise? Her impulse had been to write and say she felt obliged to go at once to

Muttiabad. But in the first place this was untrue: the Campbells were absent, and her house not yet ready. Her love of truth obliged her to confess that the natural and most convenient course would be to fall in with the Sister's suggestion.

He was away, and she had promised. The two arguments united were strong. She remembered his words, "I'm sure you are straight, and if you promise you won't break your word." It was the only thing he had ever said that pointed to a knowledge of, and certain respect for, one side of her character. And then, "You are going to promise, or I shall never believe in your friendship." That helped her. Why should she not keep to her part of the bargain in a true spirit of comradeship?

The following morning she wrote several letters: one to Dulmir, to tell him to prepare for her arrival; one to Sister Pretty, announcing her intention of going to Rosewood; and lastly, one to Tom Tremaine, which enclosed a card to her husband (a card surmounted the difficulty of commencing a letter), saying she had taken him at his word, and was about to spend a few days in the bungalow at Gurmpore.

When once it was settled and her pride was

so far conquered, she faced the situation calmly, and prepared to make the best of it.

At the station, to her delight, Tremaine met her.

"I thought I would come," he said, rather awkwardly. "Evans' cart—your cart—is here. How well you are looking!—years younger."

"Yes; Kashmir and work have done me worlds of good. You see I am very tough."

It gave him pleasure to hear her laugh. He asked if he might drive her up, and when they had gone a little way began abruptly—

"I suppose you know that Mrs Latour and Doreen are at Rosewood?"

"Mrs Latour! Then he has lent her the bungalow——"

"No, not exactly; but you remember her way. She met him and asked in her most helpless manner whether he would allow her to go there for a few days, while she looked out for a house. She is clever, and knows that old Hugh is not proof against a deliberate appeal to his kindness."

"I won't go there."

"Oh yes; please don't say that. May I drive round here, and you will have time to think it over?" He turned into a side-road, and con-

tinued, "I thought perhaps you might not have got my letter at Srinagar——"

"I won't go," she repeated.

"Listen to me," he said after a short silence, "and I think you will. Mrs Latour has been there ten days already, and from all I can gather intends if possible to remain the winter. I am not a gossip, as you know, but Doreen is confidential at times. Strange to say she likes me, and yesterday when she came to a small party of juveniles in my garden, informed me she had heard 'Mamsey' say to Captain Hawk, that as the Major was now a married man he would not object to lady visitors: the quarters were comfortable, and no doubt it would cheer him up to have them."

Tom paused, and watched the effect of his words. The colour flew to Flora's cheeks, her eyes flashed angrily—

"Impertinent woman!"

"She rides Giroflé, and——"

"How do I know that he doesn't wish her to stay?" doubtfully.

"My dear girl——"

"Very well; I will go."

So they turned back and drove to the bungalow with which she had such strange associations.

The servants were salaaming on the doorstep; the advent of the *Memsahib* was a matter of great importance in their eyes.

Mrs Latour came in from the verandah when Flora entered the sitting-room. She held out her hand as if delighted, exclaiming—

"This is a most pleasant and unexpected surprise. Major Evans was kind enough to invite me to stay here; but he did not mention that I should have the pleasure of meeting you. Dear, dear, there are so many sad memories——"

Flora interrupted hastily—

"I hope you are comfortable; I am glad it has been convenient to you to remain here while you are looking for a house; I am afraid the bungalow you had last year is let."

"Yes," answered the lady, slightly taken aback; "it seems very difficult to find one."

The sudden and unlooked-for appearance on the scene of the mistress of the house was the last thing she had calculated upon. Rumour was most persistent in asserting that husband and wife had agreed to separate, and when she heard therefore of Mrs Evans' expected arrival, she felt considerably disconcerted.

After some thought, however, she came to the

conclusion that it would be easy "with a little tact" to manage the former Miss Niel, and was not quite prepared for her calm entrance and quiet assumption of the *rôle* of hostess. Mrs Latour happily never guessed how hard it was to Flora to keep up that *rôle*, and how thoroughly unpleasing the whole situation seemed to her. Her behaviour to her guest—had the latter known it—was simply a piece of acting, inspired by indignation with the woman who had dared to take an unfair and selfish advantage of a man's generosity and chivalry. When Flora made up her mind to do a thing she did it well; and before a week had passed Mrs Latour began to feel that, without realising how it had come about, she was nothing more than a considered yet submissive guest in the house she had hoped to treat as her own.

The worst was that she could by no means discover a flaw in her hostess's civility. When alone she would pace up and down her room, and stamp with vexation. Flora asked her daily if she cared to ride, offering her Julia and Vagabond. She set aside an unoccupied study for her use, begging graciously that she would ask whom she liked, and apologising for the fact that she was obliged to

keep the so-called drawing-room for her own visitors.

Flora went most days to the hospital, but (apparently intent on a wish to please) so thoroughly arranged all plans before starting that it seemed impossible to alter them.

The two people who most enjoyed the charming lady's discomfiture were Mrs M'Cormack and Tom Tremaine. The buxom Irish widow loved nothing better than to call on "Mrs Latty" and discuss the alteration in the girl who formerly had chosen to keep so much in the background.

"She is far better-looking than she was when I saw her last, and her manners in her own house are very pleasing; you must enjoy staying with her."

"Oh, very much indeed—although I confess to being a terrible person for independence (I am thinking of taking the Mortons' bungalow; he says he will let me off half the rent now Mrs Morton has gone home). I do not quite like to allow all the dear boys to come and see me here continually: if you recollect, Mrs Evans never was sociably inclined, and indeed I am afraid she might—please don't think me vain—might not quite—let us say, understand it."

"You mean she might be jealous?"

"Oh no; *dear* Mrs M'Cormack, you do really put words into my mouth. She is quite—oh yes, quite amiable—but you know (present company excepted, of course) I do not very much care for women, and perhaps—well, perhaps she is just a little—leetle bit *close*. The dear Major is so different, so generous and good, and I am rejoiced to hear that he returns to-morrow morning."

The servants discovered this fact to Flora, thinking of course that she already knew of it. It need hardly be said that such a piece of news fell upon her ears like a bombshell. Instant flight was her first thought; but luckily the remembrance of Mrs Latour prevented her from carrying this into execution.

Doreen was quick to discover that something was amiss. She had taken a violent fancy to Mrs Evans, much to her mother's annoyance, who knew perfectly well that her small daughter's confidences were apt at times to be dangerous. They took place chiefly when she found her hostess alone, and were interspersed with questions which Flora found slightly embarrassing, especially as she knew her replies would probably be reported to the next subaltern who happened to call.

"Mamsey doesn't think you pretty," the child observed once. "She wonders why Major Evans married you. I consider him decidedly handsome —don't you?"

These remarks did not fail to wound Flora, although she blamed herself for allowing them to make the slightest impression upon her.

One morning her ring slipped from her finger and rolled along the verandah. Doreen caught it up in a moment.

"Oh, how funny! there is something written inside."

Flora took it from her quickly and turned to the window: inside the broad gold band were engraved the words, "*Mary. Dulcis est Amor*," and a date, "*March 1877*."

She dropped it as if she had been stung, and the blood rose to her forehead.

"Why do you get so red in the face?" asked Doreen, eyeing her inquisitively. "That is like Mamsey when you said she was to ride Julia and not Giroflé."

"Doreen, I never said anything of the kind" (the ring was on her finger again); "Giroflé is my especial—I mean Major Evans is very particular about Giroflé."

"When he arrives will you kiss him?"

"Don't ask such silly questions."

"Mamsey says *bother!* when Dad kisses her. Are you sorry that Major Evans is coming back? You look so sad, Ermyntrude—I intend to call you Ermyntrude."

Flora laughed in spite of herself, and so happily dispelled the suspicion that had arisen in the little girl's keen mind.

She sent her to the *ayah*, and descended the steps into the garden, then looked back across the sweet rose-hedges to the house with its picturesque flower-decked verandah, whilst she pressed the ring between her fingers until it hurt her.

Everything, yet nothing, belonged to her, she thought with poignant regret. The law gave her a right to all — husband, ring, house, gardens; yet not one of these things were hers in another sense. Love, without which life and what appertains to it is worthless, was lacking. Even her wedding-ring he had worn for another's sake, the woman no doubt whom he had loved long ago. She wondered how she should meet him: in spite of knowing full well that she had been working for his interests, the old miserable feeling of shame took possession of her as she remembered all she had said and

done, and what she must still say and do in his presence, unless she wished to lose for ever the advantage gained over Mrs Latour.

She felt that her courage was ebbing away, and even thought of Doreen's sharp eyes with dismay.

He could know nothing of it all, unless Mr Tremaine had told him. Driven to desperation, she determined to take the bull by the horns and to meet him at the station, although she dreaded the look of surprise that would greet her. Again she called the compact of good-fellowship to her help, and succeeded so well in controlling herself, that when he found her waiting for him she looked bright and unconcerned.

He shook hands frankly, with a pleasant smile on his face, while he made some commonplace remark about her goodness in having come to meet him.

"I—came to tell you that I should have gone, but unfortunately Mrs Latour——"

He laughed. "Ah, I see; you came to tell me, as you did once before, that you don't want me. I am sorry, but unfortunately I was obliged to get back."

"Nothing of the kind," she answered, rather tartly. His manner and bantering words sud-

denly took away from her the feeling of shyness and distress. "Mrs Latour goes on Thursday, and I thought it would be more polite to wait until then."

"Oh yes, for goodness' sake don't desert me. I hear you have rendered me a most valuable service — you have kept your promise like a brick."

When they reached the bungalow both looked happy and amused; and Mrs Latour, who glanced at them sharply, experienced a pang of disappointment. Major Evans' home-coming was her last card.

The situation was undoubtedly an unusual one: master and mistress of the house were bent on deceiving their guest. The Major breakfasted early and went out to his work. As in Muttiabad, he appeared to be particularly busy. The exquisite politeness to which Lady Campbell objected was less noticeable, for Evans had lost the sense of awkwardness caused by those first days, which had for many reasons been most trying. The natural friendly manner that Flora adopted made things much easier.

Mrs Latour was amiability itself and intensely puzzled. She had hoped for long and pleasant talks with her host; but he appeared to leave

everything in the hands of his wife, and was constantly absent. They were very unlike a newly married couple certainly; yet she could not deny that they seemed to be good friends. Her remarks to outsiders varied according to her moods; and when annoyed at not getting her own way in some small matter she had set her heart on, the Evans' relations to one another became black indeed.

It was undoubtedly difficult at times for the two chief actors in this little comedy to keep up appearances. Evans played his part lightly, with much humour; but Flora took hers in deadly earnest, determined to carry out conscientiously what she had undertaken, and therefore the strain was now and then very great. As Tom Tremaine had often told her, she looked at life too seriously.

One day at lunch, horses being under discussion, Mrs Latour exclaimed with enthusiasm—

"I enjoyed some most exquisite rides on Giroflé when I was here alone; but naturally after Mrs Evans' return, he being her own particular, I was obliged to content myself with Julia, who, however, is a dear sweet pony, though rather slow for my taste."

The words were spoken with a smile, but

acidity crept into her voice, and she glanced appealingly at the Major. Flora's eyes were fixed on her plate: she did not see his quick look at her, and that his mouth was twitching with amusement. She was a good horsewoman, and her riding the one thing about her he had noticed and admired formerly.

"You haven't ridden him since I came back. Won't you come out this afternoon?" he asked her. Then, remembering that he had ignored his guest — "You, Mrs Latour, said, I think, that you were obliged to drive down to look after your bungalow?"

"I am engaged; I promised to go to the hospital," Flora answered. But he continued—

"That will keep——"

"Thank you; I think I can't change."

He looked vexed, a fact that did not escape Mrs Latour's notice: she scented something below the surface and saw her chance. She pictured herself enjoying the proposed ride instead of Flora, who seemed for some reason unwilling to take advantage of it.

But before she could commence action, Evans followed his wife into the verandah.

"Why do you refuse to ride with me?" he asked impatiently.

"I told you. Because I have promised to read to Sister Pretty."

"You can do that later on. I want to see how Giroflé carries a lady——"

"Mrs Latour would be glad——"

"Pshaw! You know I don't wish that little cat to ride him. Did you see her face when you snubbed me just now?"

"Snubbed you!" She looked up at him, surprised at his sudden temper, at the frown on his forehead. Most wives would have laughed and smoothed it away; but Flora repeated coldly, "Snubbed you! I only spoke the truth."

"Don't you think you could manage to pretend a little affection for me in public?"

"You know that is impossible," she answered in a low voice.

"Then you won't come?"

She never knew what contrary demon prompted her to persist in a refusal, when her heart was beating at the thought of a gallop across the *maidan* on Giroflé, with—— Perhaps the watch-word duty rose up as of old, and shut out pleasure; or was it the knowledge that she only possessed a shapeless patched habit?

"I can't disappoint Sister Pretty; she is ill."

He turned on his heel and strode down the verandah, without another word.

Mrs Latour did not ride Giroflé; she saw neither host nor hostess. When she had finished her siesta, Dulmir brought a note from Flora apologising for her absence, and explaining that she had been obliged to go to the hospital rather sooner than she expected.

Sister Pretty could not understand her friend that afternoon: she was restless, absent-minded, almost irritable, and seemed neither inclined to read nor to gossip.

CHAPTER XIII.

"If you break your plaything yourself, dear,
Don't you cry for it all the same?"

YES; and unfortunately the playthings we break ourselves are the ones we cry for most bitterly.

Hugh Evans did not ask his wife to ride with him again, and Flora would sooner have bitten her tongue out than have risked the chance of a refusal by suggesting that she was now in a different frame of mind, and anxious to atone for her obstinacy.

A decided constraint sprang up between the two, politeness increased visibly, and the girl found that involuntarily she took refuge in Mrs Latour's and Doreen's presence, and avoided being alone with her husband.

She had not spoken openly of her departure, lest her guest should finally change her mind, and discover that her bungalow was not yet

ready to receive her; but she made arrangements to leave the same day, and wrote to Lady Campbell to that effect.

Mrs Latour was not slow to notice the slightly strained circumstances that had arisen between husband and wife since the morning Giroflé had been the subject of discussion. Her manner to Flora altered almost imperceptibly, and she no longer strove as hard to hide the dislike she felt for her. Only two days remained. Mrs Evans had not ridden Giroflé certainly, yet neither had she; and the pleasant strolls in the garden with the Major, which she had contemplated, were as far off as ever. Again and again she let fly veiled shafts of malice. The fact that her hostess utterly ignored them did not serve to mollify her.

Matters came to something of a climax the afternoon before she was to leave. They had finished tea in the verandah, and Flora (to whom Dulmir had just imparted the state of affairs) informed her guest apologetically that her husband would be unable to provide a cart in which to send her and Doreen home on the following morning, the only available one having just lost a wheel.

This circumstance was simple enough, and Mrs Latour herself constantly boasted that most of

the dog-carts in the station were at her disposal; but she was smarting under the thought that she had reached the end of her visit without accomplishing one of the objects she had had in view. This man did not care for his wife, that was evident; and yet he allowed her to gain the upper hand, and rule his establishment in the same mean way that she had ruled her brother's.

"I think I shall ask Major Evans about it," she remarked coolly; "he will probably be able to manage something."

"He would be very glad to do so; but, as I tell you, I am afraid it is impossible." Flora kept her temper; but her lip curled, and the contempt she had always felt for Mrs Latour looked out of her eyes, and stung that lady to madness.

"Indeed!" she cried in her shrillest tones. "I must confess I have seen nothing during my stay in this house to make me believe that Major Evans' wishes are likely to be the same as yours: in fact——"

She paused: Hugh Evans had stepped out of the drawing-room, and stood facing her with anger in his sombre blue eyes. For the second time he intervened between these two women, but under what different circumstances.

Flora had grown very pale; he went nearer her and slipped his hand through her arm, then said with extreme politeness—

"Mrs Latour, I don't allow any one to speak to my wife as you have just spoken. I am sorry; but if you will allow me, I am going to order a carriage and drive you to your bungalow this evening. I think you told me it was ready to receive you, and my servants will do anything you wish."

For the first time in her life the charming lady was entirely at a disadvantage. She clenched her hands and stammered—

"What a poor little thing I am! I'm sure I don't know what I said: you are so hard on me. But I will go at once, *at once*, I and my child. I have many friends, I am thankful to say—and before you married you were one of my best." With which parting shot she swept into the house, a picture of lovely injured innocence.

"Thank you," Flora murmured as she disappeared. "And the worst is, what she said is true."

He had let her arm drop, and now paced to the end of the verandah and back.

"Confound the little devil! how angry she made me," he said, then threw himself into a chair and laughed loudly. "Total defeat and

rout of the enemy. Splendid! I don't suppose she will ever ask to come here again."

Flora could not laugh. She bent over a tub of maiden-hair; a lump rose in her throat and seemed to choke her,—she did not speak.

He went into the house calling Dulmir, and before another hour had passed a carriage came to the door and Mrs Latour appeared, silent and frigid, Doreen behind her.

The child ran out into the verandah and threw her arms round Flora's neck.

"Mamsey *is* angry with you, my Ermyntrude," she said; "she tore several things when she was finishing packing. But I love you, and I mean to come on the sly to see you every day: I shall say I have been to the gardens."

"No, Doreen dear; besides, I am going to-morrow. I have promised to stay with some cousins, and told them I would come before this."

"Oh, darling — good-bye, good-bye. Great Scot! there's that provoking woman screaming for me——"

"Doreen, what a way to speak of your mother——"

But she had gone like the wind, and Flora was alone.

When they had driven off she put on her hat, took some sugar, and walked across the compound to the stable. Giroflé's *syce* came forward and opened the door of his stall; she went in and fed the beautiful animal. As she leaned her head against his soft neck tears escaped and rolled down her cheeks; her heart was sore still over the broken plaything. "Good-bye, good-bye; I shall never ride you again, dear," she whispered.

"Major *Sahib* buying Fullee very quick," said the *syce*, who was communicative and proud of his English. "Dulmir riding back from pickanick at *Sarrāf* bungalow,[1] and going to Sirkurbad by night-train to buy dreckly."

What did he mean? It was only when Flora reached the house that she began to understand. Again she recalled the events of the picnic, and the truth became clear. How like him! Yet, why had he done it? To save Dick? To thwart Mrs Latour? Out of pity for herself, perhaps. She could not answer these questions, but realised that it had been a generous impulsive action, such as had landed him at last in a lifelong difficulty.

She dreaded an evening alone with him, and did not trust herself, but went to her room, leaving word that she had gone to bed with a headache.

[1] Banker.

Hugh Evans came back not long afterwards, an amused look still on his face. He wanted to tell his wife of the drive, of his great civility, of the lady's dignified attitude; of her reproachful eyes and appealing childlike glances, which would have turned the head of any subaltern.

He was disappointed, and stood for a moment outside her door, half inclined to call to her, but changed his mind, whistled to Pickle, and went into the verandah to smoke.

On the following afternoon, before leaving, Flora determined to carry out a task she had set herself. He was in the best of humours, relieved, she imagined, at the thought of being alone once more. Her packing was finished, and they stood in the drawing-room together.

"I want to ask you something," she began at last, with hesitation. "This ring fell off once, and I saw that—there was a name—inscription on it. I thought perhaps you might want it back; you—you could give me another. I suppose," laughing rather nervously, "it wouldn't do to go without one?"

He took her hand and looked at the broad gold band.

"I recollect. I pulled it off my little finger that night; there wasn't any other. How clearly I

remember it all, although I was supposed to be dying. You knelt down and kissed my hand, and said 'Thank you.'"

She drew back hastily.

"Don't!—I can't bear to speak of it—I can't bear to think of it." A hot wave of colour rose to her face.

"No, you have shown that pretty plainly." There was a slight touch of sarcasm in his voice.

"I—I wonder what you thought of me."

"I thought you a very sensible girl."

"I—I was so miserable just then, rather off my head I think, or I should never have done it. It was such a vile mockery—to take a solemn oath before God——"

"To love, honour, and *obey*, eh?"

His eyes twinkled; he could not help teasing her as he had teased his little sister Ellen long ago. In a softer mood she was at his mercy, and he felt suddenly inspired with a perverse wish to make her angry,—"get a rise" as he inwardly expressed it. The easy comradeship with which she had treated him was pleasant enough and exactly what he had wished; but so strange is human nature that he found himself involuntarily resenting it the least bit, just as he had resented

her avoidance of him the last few days. He was not vain, but had been accustomed to attention, if not adulation, from the fair sex; and although it bored him at times, the absence of it was a little disconcerting.

"Supposing at the present moment I ordered you to stay, would you obey me?"

Flora shook her head.

"Do you know that I have the law on my side?—it is only through my extreme kindness and generosity that you are able to fly about the country in this independent fashion."

She turned away with an impatient gesture and bit her lip—angry tears were not very far from her eyes—yet in old days she had prided herself on being always able to "understand chaff."

"Give me the ring," he said suddenly.

She held out her hand; any one watching her closely would have noticed that she had grown rather pale. He took it from her finger and read the inscription aloud—

"*Mary. Dulcis est Amor. March 1877*," then smiled and held it tightly between his palms.

"It was my mother's. I gave it her on one of her birthdays. We were more like brother and sister than mother and son. We had had a little

tiff, and the motto was in reference to some joke. She didn't know Latin, and I remember I wouldn't tell her what it meant: she had to grub it out for herself in a dictionary—she dared not ask any one to translate it. She knew me, you see, and thought it might not be fit for publication."

He looked down at it for a moment, and his eyes became soft and dark; the pupil seemed to spread over the iris, making the whole a deep uniform black.

He caught her slim fingers, slipped the ring back into its place, and said seriously and gently—

"Love is sweet: you understand it. I suppose it is necessary to all poor human beings in some form or other. Although you don't like me, you knew how to love a brother."

Flora was silent, and Dulmir entered swiftly to announce that the cart had come round for the *Memsahib*.

They did not speak much on the way to the station. As they stood on the platform he asked quickly and not without embarrassment—

"Have you changed your mind about the—the money?"

"No."

As he threw himself back in his chair half an hour later and lit his pipe, he looked round the bungalow with a sigh of relief.

"I must say, Pickle, it's rather good to be rid of the women-folk: I'm afraid I'm not cut out for domestic happiness"—then suddenly he laughed, his eyes danced with amusement.

"What a shame it was to bully her! she blushed and writhed under it like a child, and would gladly have boxed my ears."

Lady Campbell was delighted to see Flora, and declared that she looked grand. She had excited herself greatly at the thought of her stay at Gurmpore, and felt sure "the dears" must have "made it up." It was disappointing to find the girl disinclined to talk of her husband.

"We are very good friends," she said indifferently; "he likes me a little better than Mrs Latour, that is all."

Even Sir George laughed loudly over the history of Mrs Latour's defeat, but the description of the final *coup* was somewhat curtailed.

"Really, Flora, you must have more clothes," Lady Puff exclaimed one day, when examining her cousin's somewhat scanty wardrobe. "I insist on your sending to England for a few dresses; you really can afford it."

She was shocked to think that such garments should have been worn by a bride when taking up her residence for the first time in her new home. "It is to be hoped they imagined it was because of the mourning," she ejaculated aside.

"I will get a new habit, if you like," said Flora.

CHAPTER XIV.

FLORA was soon established in her little bungalow near the Campbells. As time went on she found plenty to do: in the hospital they were grateful for help, and Lady Puff was very glad of her assistance amongst the soldiers' wives. Of her companionship too; and before long the girl felt the benefit of contact with a sunny nature: it encouraged her involuntarily into a better opinion of herself. She became a greater favourite than she had ever been at Gurmpore.

The winter months in Muttiabad were bright and cold; fires in the evenings were pleasant and often necessary. In India—in most stations—people are dependent on themselves and each other for amusement; no concerts or entertainments take place except those provided by enterprising amateurs. Much accepted at home as a matter of course is entirely lacking; society papers arrive too long after their publication to

be of particular interest; and ladies are deprived of the pleasure of shopping, having to make their purchases in an "emporium" of expensive and not very fresh goods (kept probably by an Englishwoman, who treats her customers with condescending familiarity), or from the pedlars who come to their verandahs. Now and then a box from England—the contents of which are viewed by a picked company of friends—causes great excitement, and the possessor of the same is often kind enough to allow her new and fashionable garments to be copied by a select few.

Flora naturally did not join in the festivities that took place; but she derived pleasure from Lady Campbell's gaieties (listening with interest to her piquante accounts of balls and parties), and often assisted her neighbours when assistance was required in the arrangement of *tableaux vivants* or theatricals. Young men especially sought her out, in a manner that would have astonished Mrs Latour. She possessed a very weak spot in her heart for them, and a Mr Wyndham in Sir George's battery was a particular favourite, owing to a fancied likeness to her brother.

In former days at Gurmpore she had never found time to cultivate acquaintances, and the

anxiety and continual fear of disgrace had weighed her down and sapped her energies. She did not in the least realise that the improvement in her health, appearance, and general expansion was due greatly to her freedom from care and unceasing dread. She had loved poor Dick strongly, and knew that in one way the blank left by his death could never be filled. As time passed on his weaknesses became vague: she could only think of his good resolves and his lovable nature, looking back with tender remembrance to his last kiss and the touching boyish attempt at consolation, "Cheer up, old girl." How rarely she had received such expressions of affection from him. She had starved all her life, growing gradually accustomed to scanty fare, and expecting nothing else.

Towards the end of December the two batteries of horse-artillery went to the practice-camp in the neighbourhood of Delhi, and the gunner ladies were left disconsolate. Flora then stayed with Lady Campbell, who eventually persuaded her to accompany her to the *dâk* bungalow[1] near the camp, where she proposed staying until it broke up. They took ponies and saddles (Sir

[1] Staging bungalow.

George providing for his cousin). The little lady was in high glee, and determined to enjoy herself thoroughly after a dismal Christmas.

The *dâk* bungalow lay about a mile from the camp, and, like the majority of its kind, was dirty, ramshackle, and provided with a very incapable cook. Nevertheless, the ladies did not complain, for they were in the saddle all day, and Flora revelled in the active open-air life, which brought the colour to her cheeks and courage to her heart.

Sometimes they dined at mess; at other times Sir George and one or two of the officers would join their sketchy meal in the bungalow.

Flora heard at intervals from Sister Pretty, Mrs M'Cormack, and Tremaine, but of her husband only through the last. Mrs Latour, it appeared, had decided not to drop his acquaintance, but had ceased to look upon him as an easy prey even in the matter of personal appeals. Of course Tom said nothing of the inevitable gossip Mrs Evans' visit to Gurmpore had caused. Had she not returned there, peoples' tongues would have been more silent; but her stay at Rosewood, combined with Mrs Latour's insinuations, caused much speculation.

Evans had gone on leave, and Flora might

possibly see him, Tremaine wrote. He himself was starting for England almost at once, as his wife had not been very well and wished him to come home if possible: he was sorry he could not manage Muttiabad on the way to Bombay.

One morning the two ladies rode down to the camp before parade. There was to be a sham fight, and they were anxious to see the fun. The morning was brilliant: they sat on their ponies watching the busy scene with pleasure, and waiting to speak to Sir George, who could not go out with them, being detained in camp on duty.

Rows of white tents gleamed in the bright sunlight; the men went to and fro among the picketed horses as the bugles summoned them to their work.

Several friends came up, and Lady Campbell was constantly greeting unexpected acquaintances.

Two officers—one in mufti—riding slowly towards them, noticed their ponies and neat habits.

"Who are they?" asked the man out of uniform.

"One is Lady Campbell. The other girl with the pretty figure I don't know: I've seen her every day; she is a beautiful rider."

Flora turned as he spoke, leaning forward to

pat her horse's neck, and smiling at the boy to whom she was talking. Then she looked up, and came face to face with her husband.

He had recognised her first, and rode forward at once: she was unprepared, and caught her breath quickly, holding out her hand to him without a word. It was a curious greeting between husband and wife, Lady Campbell thought as she watched them. They might have been a pair of friends or acquaintances glad to meet, —not even brother and sister, who would have exchanged "How d'ye do's" with more abandon or subtlety.

He experienced much pleasure at seeing Lady Campbell again, and she felt more than ever charmed with him, now that he was natural and free from the *gêne* caused by the embarrassing circumstances under which they had been introduced to each other. When they started he rode beside her and appeared to forget his wife's existence. Flora watched him as he talked to Lady Puff: he was well mounted, and looked his best on horseback. Her companion, young Wyndham, who was a talkative youth, found her very unresponsive.

She felt hurt and angry. It was a relief when they let their horses go and galloped

across the plains; while the guns rolled full speed behind them with a grand rattle and roar, dashing over the ground heedless of the obstacles that came in their way. Through dry *nullahs*,[1] past native villages where hideous buffalo wallowed in pools of filthy water, over mud-plastered walls and banks. Such a gallop was worth living for, Flora thought, and she forgot her woes, but pulled up to find Evans at her side.

"You don't mind riding other people's ponies apparently," were his first words when they had recovered breath. It was certainly taking the war into the enemy's camp. She did not speak at once, then answered evasively—

"I have not got one of my own yet."

"I have none here—Giroflé is lame."

"Lame!"

This was a terrible piece of intelligence, and carried the conversation to Gurmpore and Rosewood. There were plenty of things to tell. Dulmir, having quarrelled with the *khitmagar*, had gone home to his wife. The pink roses in the garden had all been stolen, and had appeared on other people's dinner-tables; but although the *māli* probably made a small income out of them, he was too good a man to be parted with.

[1] Ravines.

Doreen Latour had taken to visiting him at times, and her conversation interested him greatly. He looked at her as he said this, with a gleam of amusement in his eyes, and added—

"She asks every time when you are coming, and has taken to lecturing me on my duties."

Which remark Flora did not appear to hear. She whipped up her pony again.

"Old Tom is going home," was the next bit of information. "That charming wife of his (who people tell me is a sweet creature, but who, I think, wants whipping) is seedy, or has quarrelled with her aunt or something."

"Yes; I heard from him a few days ago."

"You and he are great pals?"

Something in his voice vexed her. She replied warmly, as she had to Lady Campbell some months before when speaking on the same subject: "He is the best friend I have in the world; I shall never forget his goodness to me when everybody—when—I was very unhappy."

"And yet he was mainly responsible for the worst thing that ever happened to you?" he remarked drily.

It was impossible to misunderstand the allusion.

"He was not responsible!" she cried. Her eyes

flashed, the colour came to her cheeks, and she drew herself to her full height on the slender polo-pony. The look of care and trouble that her last words had called up vanished. "You mustn't say that. No one was to blame but myself—no one. Not you even; you—you meant kindly. I was neither a child nor a fool, but a woman who knew the world, and had seen a great deal of life—the saddest side of it. It was my fault entirely—absolutely."

She spoke with passionate emphasis, and he watched her curiously, thinking, "How she hates me!" But this time he did not pity her; instead, a strange irritation arose within him that was almost anger. He controlled himself, however, although his voice was rather unsteady as he replied—

"You evidently hope for the spaniel and walnut-tree solution of the difficulty, and upon my soul, I am not sure that you won't drive me to it some day."

How could they ever understand each other? She took things so desperately hard, and he had laughed all his days, letting his troubles—keen as they were at the time—slip away like water off a duck's back. She, thinking only of the indissoluble tie that bound them, and her share

in the matter, did not guess the under-current of truth that lay beneath what seemed to her a flippant joke.

With a gesture of indignation she turned her horse aside and put him at a bush-fence, so avoiding an answer, and, as it happened, cutting short all further argument — for at the corner they met Lady Campbell, and several men who were with her. Mr Wyndham and another subaltern rode up to Flora at once, and Hugh Evans again joined her cousin and the friend with whom he was staying.

The little lady invited them all to tea at the bungalow, and gave Major Evans to understand that he of course was expected and welcome at any time.

Lunch on such an exciting day consisted of sandwiches, for they were determined to miss none of the fun; and a certain major, not celebrated for smartness, stuffed the pockets of his uniform with oranges, for the benefit of the ladies.

Five-o'clock tea, however, with the help of a picnic-basket and tumblers when cups failed, proved to be a luxurious meal; and there was a great deal of laughing and nonsense. A large white Persian cat, belonging to the policeman's

bungalow over the way, sat on the table, and gravely watched their proceedings. Evans devoted himself studiously to his hostess as before, and Flora seemed too busy and amused to notice the fact, or to care in the least whether he spoke to her or not.

The young fellows who knew her at Muttiabad had heard that Mrs Evans could not stand the climate of Gurmpore, and that she and her husband did not "hit it off"; therefore their indifference to one another was a foregone conclusion.

Sir George returned late, and the stars had begun to appear before most of the party left. They all stood gazing at the vast indigo dome above, and enjoying the cool air: Orion's belt and the solemn gleaming planets reminded them of home. In the confusion caused by the darkness, Evans did not say good night to his wife.

"Why were you making such a noise with Curly Wyndham and Major M'Cragan?" Katie Campbell asked crossly, as she linked her arm in Flora's, and they strolled back to the house together. "I feel quite provoked with you; your husband hadn't a chance of speaking to you."

"I assure you he was thankful to be relieved

of the necessity, and perfectly happy talking to you—so much so that he forgot to say good-bye to me."

"He thought you had gone in, I suppose——"

"Oh no, I think not"—indifferently. "But we had sufficient conversation this afternoon to last for a long time."

"He tells me he goes off the day after to-morrow to shoot snipe; you might just as well be nice to him, Flora."

"I don't know what you mean by nice; it is of no use our trying to agree, and"—her voice changed almost imperceptibly—"I would much rather not see him. I—I think I am happier when I—forget all about him."

But Flora's wish was not to be fulfilled. True, she hardly had an opportunity of speaking to her husband in the next two days, for he seemed to avoid her, showing, if he rode with them at all, a decided preference for Lady Campbell's society, who soon called him Cousin Hugh, and was dying to break her promise to Flora, and talk to him of his marriage.

The night before he was to leave, however, he and his friend Captain Arnold, who belonged to another battery, dined at the D mess, and several ladies were present. The dinner was a

pleasant one. Evans and his wife sat at opposite ends of the table, he next Sir George and another man, and she on one side of the colonel. He had persistently ignored her all day. She wondered if he would even remember to say good-bye, when, to her astonishment, he suddenly came up afterwards and asked if he might drive her back.

They were alone for a moment and standing near a lamp: he read surprise and hesitation in her face.

"I don't know," she began; "I—I promised Mr——"

He interrupted quickly—

"That chattering young ass Wyndham, I suppose, or one of those boys," and turned such a look of wrath upon her that she was puzzled and startled into acquiescence, although inwardly rebellious.

He was driving a horse of Captain Arnold's, which had only once before been in harness; and as soon as they reached the main road and the *syce* left his head, the animal gave a furious bound, as if bent on disappearing, cart and all, into a ravine which looked black and perilous in the moonlight. Flora held her breath but did not move. With a skilled hand he got the big waler back, which, however, went as

on wires, starting at the trembling shadows cast by the *peepul*-trees, and the dark forms of natives who passed them now and then. There was not much opportunity for conversation happily, for neither could think of anything to say. Once Flora had a remark on the tip of her tongue in reference to the beauty of the starlit heavens and the brilliancy of the moon; but the atmosphere seemed charged with something that forbade such truisms. It was strange to find herself alone with him in the quiet night, after the curious indifference he had displayed, and his neglect of her. Why had she consented to go with him? And then she answered involuntarily, "Because I was obliged to." Her eyes had sunk before the angry troubled look in his, and she had followed him meekly.

"Are you all right?" he asked twice; perhaps the necessity of watching the restless horse made speech difficult, perhaps he was ashamed of himself. At any rate, when they reached the bungalow he lifted her down and stood silent like an awkward boy.

"Are you going to-morrow?" she inquired.

"Yes; but—Arnold wants me to come back."

"Oh!"

"I suppose you will be thankful if I don't?"

with a shrug and a laugh in which some embarrassment was noticeable.

"Don't please say that; I—I——"

"Very well; I won't tease you any more: you are too truthful. But I want to ask you one thing. Will you let me send you down Vagabond?"

"Why should you? George has several ponies here; he is so kind."

"You won't, then? I might have saved myself the trouble of asking——"

"Ye-es. Yes, I will. Thank you."

"Ah! that's good. As for calling me Hugh, I suppose that is quite out of the question."

She was silent.

"You leave that to Lady Campbell."

"Oh! it is so different."

"Flora, where's the friendship gone to?"

He took her gently by the arms and turned her round: the moonlight falling on her face made it look white. She drew away hastily, and a swift look of annoyance shot into her eyes.

"It cannot be all on one side," she said. "Yours is so fitful that I am at a loss to account for your graciousness to-night."

He stepped back and looked at her in perplexity. She had never spoken so to him before:

sarcasm was his own weapon, and unexpected from her. Then he answered quietly—

"I understand; you mean that you wish our compact to be at an end. I am sorry, but I suppose it is my fault. Good-bye."

He shook hands as with a stranger, and walked out of the tumble-down verandah to call for his cart.

In a moment she was at his side: her voice trembled a little—

"No, no; I don't wish it to be at an end. Please forgive me for saying that: it was nasty. I—I didn't mean it, Hugh."

CHAPTER XV.

THE days passed quickly, one very like the other. Flora and Lady Puff delighted in watching the heavy battery at practice, and seeing the wise old elephants which dragged the guns replaced by slow patient bullocks, as they came near the firing position. Flora liked the great boom and roar, although each time her heart jumped into her mouth and she started in her saddle.

One afternoon they had ridden out with Captain Arnold and Major M'Cragan. Sir George being on duty, they cantered round where the artillery was practising, hoping to meet him. It was wonderful to watch the guns over the rough ground.

"Come up here if you want to see a good spill," called Major M'Cragan grimly from a small eminence above a deep wide *nullah*.

Flora and Katie rode to the top and looked at the broken sandy track, which wound down

one side of the ravine and up the other with an awkward twist.

"How can a gun possibly get through there?" asked Flora.

"You will see in a moment."

He had hardly finished speaking before they heard the well-known rattle, and six horses with a gun and limber dashed full speed into the *nullah*.

There was a moment of suspense, then an exclamation from all. At the bottom, where the road turned abruptly, the off-leader fell, and in a moment gun, horses, and men were all hidden in a cloud of yellow dust. Two officers rode down; some one shouted, "Is anybody hurt?"

Presently the cloud subsided; several of the gunners were on their feet, and busy with the horses, which seemed to be struggling in a confused mass.

Flora longed to turn away, but the whole scene had a horrid fascination. The wheel driver was drawn from beneath a horse and laid upon a bank: he did not move, and in a moment the girl's nursing instinct was on the alert. She urged her pony down the hill as fast as he could go, and before Major M'Cragan had time to interfere was at the side of the injured man.

She dismounted, and uttered an exclamation of dismay: it was Mr Wyndham. One of the officers had raised his head and loosened his collar, but he remained unconscious. Close by stood a horse with his flank terribly torn; the men were still occupied in righting the gun.

Flora knelt at the boy's side, and gave him some brandy from a flask which somebody produced: she discovered a cut on his head hidden by the hair, but that appeared to be the least of the harm done, for when he came to himself the slightest movement gave him pain, and she feared an internal injury.

They made a rough litter, and Lady Campbell suggested that he should be taken to the *dâk* bungalow, which was not very far off.

"His unlucky star must be in the ascendant," Captain Arnold said, and explained how the colonel had given orders that subalterns without previous experience should be allowed the opportunity of driving over difficult ground. "It is the first time he has been out, poor chap!"

He was laid on a bed in the bungalow, and owing to the fact that the Campbells had their things there, they were able to make him comfortable until the doctor came. When he did,

his verdict was, three ribs broken, and slight concussion of the brain.

Flora at once took the patient in charge, and the doctor was thankful to obtain the assistance of some one who, if not exactly a trained nurse, was very like one.

She sat up all night, and then Katie Campbell took her place; but the little lady being nervous in illness, was thankful when the girl felt sufficiently rested to resume her post.

Young Wyndham was badly hurt, and there seemed little chance of moving him for some time.

At the end of the week the camp was to break up, and Lady Campbell having settled to return to Muttiabad, suggested that a nurse should be sent for to Delhi.

But Flora would not hear of this. Only too happy to find occupation in her own especial line, she was particularly glad that she could help the boy, for whom she felt a motherly affection.

When Hugh Evans returned to the camp, after a few days' snipe-shooting, he was somewhat astonished to find the *dâk* bungalow turned into a hospital, and his wife in charge, entirely absorbed in her duties.

Although he had spoken slightingly of "Curly," he was sorry for him: misfortune never failed to gain his sympathy. He went daily to see him, and made several half-hours pass very quickly to the young fellow, who thought him splendid company.

But he was not in his usual good spirits: the snipe had been disappointing; and he felt restless, and unaccountably irritable.

This did not escape Flora's notice: she missed the easy good-fellowship of Rosewood, and even his teasing and flippancy. It had hurt her; yet now it seemed preferable to this other mood, which was new, and separated them absolutely. She could not ask what ailed him, or why he had changed; and when he came, generally found something to do in the other room. The boy's evident admiration for his nurse annoyed him. "Young idiot!" he ejaculated inwardly, noticing his grateful glances as Flora administered his medicine, or arranged his pillows.

"Will you come over to Liddon's for a little stroll?" Evans asked one evening when he was leaving. Flora nodded, and, putting on her hat, crossed the road to the bungalow of a young policeman, who was away in England with his wife on six months' leave.

The garden was luxuriant and large. Little green parrots and bulbuls flew in and out of the shrubberies, and well-kept walks wound between tamarisk- and banyan-trees. In one hidden corner was a picturesque well, beneath a large-leaved banana.

They walked slowly along the paths, uttering a few trivialities. He was thinking to himself, "How shall I begin?" and she, "What does he want to say to me?"

Presently he asked abruptly—

"How long are you going on with this job? You are looking worn-out already."

"I don't know. The doctor who came from Delhi is rather puzzled. Three ribs were broken, you see, and it may be a longish business."

"The camp breaks up on Thursday; have they sent for a nurse?"

"I intend to stay until he can be moved."

"Alone? That is impossible!"

Flora looked up. She resented the peremptory tone he had suddenly adopted.

"I shall have the *ayah;* Katie must go back. I am a nurse, and I cannot neglect what I have undertaken to do."

He interrupted quickly—

"That is nonsense. You are not a regular nurse, thank goodness!"

"I wish to stay."

"Perhaps, but I don't wish you to do so."

"I am free to do as I like," she exclaimed hotly. "We decided to go our own ways; you cannot suddenly interfere with my plans——"

"I have no desire to have you gossiped about. You seem determined always to forget you are my wife."

"You will not allow me to forget it," she said with bitterness. "Why don't you leave me alone?—I am old enough to judge for myself as to what is right. Things haven't changed for you; why don't you forget my existence, and let me try and forget yours?"

"Because nothing can alter the fact that I am your husband, and I don't intend to allow you to put yourself in a false position."

She laughed, the old hard laugh which had been forgotten lately, then said—

"It is rather late for you to think of that—you who put me in a false position every day. Your very presence here makes me feel it. Why don't you go, and let me have peace again?"

Suddenly her voice broke; she buried her face in her hands, and burst into tears.

Hugh Evans was distressed and embarrassed. This was an unexpected conclusion to his well-

prepared attack. The enemy, if she had known it, was making use of most effectual weapons. A woman's tears had always seemed to him mysterious, harassing, terrible; and coming from this self-contained girl, who so rarely showed him a touch of her real self, they hurt him as the cry of a wounded animal never failed to do, in spite of his sporting proclivities.

He watched her in silence for a moment, then said unsteadily—

"For God's sake don't cry! What have I done?"

She felt ashamed of herself—such lack of control was unusual; but he thought rightly that she had worked too hard—several nights of watching and anxiety had worn her out. She dashed the tears from her eyes, then exclaimed passionately—

"Oh, I am a fool! But life is so difficult: no sooner have I found work to help me to bear it than you try to exert authority over me to prevent me from doing the only thing by which I can be of the smallest bit of use in the world. If you cared it would be different; but I am nothing to you—nothing. You do not love me as much as your horse or your dog. You have no right to dictate to me, and I have no need to obey you. I shall decide for myself, and act as I think fit."

"Very well," he spoke quietly; but his voice sounded hoarse, and she saw that he was strongly moved. "You are not a child; I can't force you to anything against your will. However, I have not spoken without thought; and I warn you that, although my presence may be disagreeable to you, I shall stay here for the rest of my leave. Liddon offered me the bungalow the other day when he heard I was going to shoot in the *jheel*.[1] I will trouble you as little as possible. You may forget my existence if you like, but I shall not forget my duty."

He turned and walked away, leaving her standing beneath the large-leaved palm with a look of stubborn misery on her pale face.

[1] Marsh.

CHAPTER XVI.

YOUNG Wyndham progressed favourably, but could not be moved. The camp broke up, and the batteries departed. Lady Campbell knew nothing of her friend's quarrel with her husband, and was delighted to hear that he intended remaining at the police bungalow in order to continue his shooting. She had tried hard to persuade Flora to leave her post, for the girl looked ill and tired; but finding her obstinate, determined to send down, if possible, the wife of a private in Sir George's battery who was accustomed to nursing.

"She can bring Scamp," Flora said wearily. "I want a companion."

When they had all gone she felt very forlorn, but tried to be cheerful for the sake of her patient, played cards, read to him, and looked after him in a most unselfish and devoted manner. No wonder he adored her.

Friends of his rode out from Delhi, and the doctor came daily. Sometimes travellers arrived at the *dâk* bungalow and occupied the only empty room; but it was a desolate spot, and once or twice, when the boy had fallen asleep, she took Scamp on her lap and smoothed his soft head, while a few tears escaped and rolled down her cheeks.

Evans kept his word. He stayed at the house opposite and passed his days in shooting, but he did not go near her. In that, too, he was true to his promise. She watched him mount his pony in the morning (he had sent for Giroflé, who was apparently sound again) or drive away in Mr Liddon's cart. Vagabond was tethered in her compound, and she rode him constantly, and soon found that her husband often came in during her absence to sit with young "Curly," who was shy in talking of these visits, for he divined that all was not right between them. Others were far from the truth in their guesses, and thought it a most excellent arrangement that Major Evans could enjoy his shooting and the society of his wife at the same time.

Flora was very miserable. She did not forget his existence; and the thought that he was so near and yet would not see or speak to her, wounded

her to the quick. She knew she had brought it all on herself—had defied him, and persisted in her resolve to do what he disapproved. True, he had been overbearing, and had assumed an inexcusable authority. Friendship it was to have been, according to their mutual agreement. Of course that was only a term for easy indifferent acquaintanceship, but even this seemed impossible. She possessed far too much knowledge of the world to believe in a genuine platonic friendship between man and woman, unless in exceptional cases, such as that of herself and Tom Tremaine, she reflected.

He did not care for her, yet had changed his plans out of duty, he said, to shield her from gossip. Or was he as obstinate and proud as herself, and determined not to give in when once he had made up his mind? Every morning Mr Wyndham's servant went across to him to report the progress of the patient, and many times she knew that he had given help and advice.

Why had he the power to make her so unhappy? she wondered. It was difficult to disguise her depression from young Curly. The gunner's wife was a great assistance—a cheery woman, with a strong Scotch accent, whose niece, strange to say, had been laundry-maid to a distant connection of her own in Perthshire.

She had many a talk with the Major over the way, and formed her own conclusions.

"He's a fine gentleman," she thought, "mighty anxious aboot his leddy, but he lo'es his pipe and his gun—there's mony a one like him."

Once or twice it came into Flora's mind that she would go to him, conquer her pride, and tell him how lonely she was, and how she longed to be friends again. But what was the use? It would only cause further difficulties, further disappointments. The time was coming to an end, and then she must go back to Muttiabad and win peace again.

One morning he did not go out as usual, and her mind sprang to the sudden conclusion that he had gone. She stood by the window watching. The bungalow seemed to wear a deserted appearance: before long, however, his bearer emerged from the verandah and crossed the road. She went into the other room to see about her patient's breakfast, and found that her hand was trembling, the cups clattered one against the other. What did she fear? She hardly knew. How absurd. She poured out the tea and cut the bread-and-butter.

"How white you look, Mrs Evans!" Wyndham said. "I feel a perfect brute, upon my

word. I believe I'm knocking you up completely."

She laughed.

"You know I tell you that if you are too grateful to me I shall go away. I am all right; and as for comfort, can you imagine anything more luxurious than they have made it look? No place for the squirrels and *pi* (pariah) dogs that came to visit us (by the way, where is Billi this morning?) when we got here — dear me, how long ago? It seems months."

"It has passed quickly to me; and the worst is, it will soon be over, like all good times."

She laughed again.

"So much for broken ribs: I shouldn't care for good times of that description."

Mrs Roberts' shadow fell across the uneven ground, and Flora darted out, asking breathlessly—

"Is there anything the matter?"

"Maircey me, how ye frichtened me, lassie! It's just the Major, he's bad wi' fever — that is, naething serious, ye ken——" she added, as she caught sight of the girl's face. "It's a certainty when they gang shootin' in yon jails, or whatever they ca' them."

Flora said nothing more, but put on her hat,

took some sugar, and went into the compound, where she stood for five minutes feeding and caressing Vagabond. Then suddenly she left him and walked across the road to the Liddons' bungalow.

She did not hesitate, but went straight to her husband's room, knocked, and entered. Hugh Evans was lying covered up with blankets: a slight attack of malarial fever had pulled him down in a few hours. Nothing is so calculated to make a man look a complete wreck.

Billi, the cat, was curled up beside him. As Flora went to the bedside the animal stretched its beautiful white body and rubbed against her. Quietly and shyly she said—

"I came to see if I could do anything for you."

The colour rushed to his face, and he answered coldly—

"Thank you. You are very kind to make such an effort; but I won't trouble you or take you away from your patient. I shall be right in a few hours, and Mrs Roberts will come over and look after me. That is all I require."

The girl gazed at him helplessly: for a moment she did not understand that he was dismissing her. Then she turned round, and, without a word, left the room.

She walked slowly down the garden-path; intolerable pain arose, almost choking her. Those other words, uttered in the disorder of sickness, that had hurt her so much, "For God's sake keep her out of the way!" were nothing to this cool deliberate indication that he did not wish for her assistance or her company. He had looked ill, and in his blue eyes she had read resentment and displeasure.

Womanlike, she longed to go back, to implore his forgiveness, and beg him to let her stay. All thought of blaming him left her; she only said to herself that it was her fault.

And this ceaseless wearing misery that knocked at her heart and would not be denied—was it contrition, remorse? Was it love, love for the husband who would never be anything but a stranger to her, who had sent her away? She acknowledged it now; she realised that the craving all these days to see him, speak to him, and hear his voice, had almost been unbearable.

"How can I go on! how can I go on!" she cried, and then came the remembrance of the evening on which he had driven her back from camp, and the smile that had flashed into his face, taking her by surprise, as he turned at the sound of his name from her lips and held out

his hands impulsively, saying, "Capital, thank you: you will get used to it in time." She had thought for a moment that he was going to kiss her, but if so he had changed his mind. Afterwards, she had cried herself to sleep, for no reason but a woman's

"Must a little weep, Love,
(Foolish me!)"

Had she thrown away her chance, lost it for ever through pride and self-will? Such recriminations were torture, yet the answer came—No; he did not love her, had only cared to feel interest in her when others showed her attention. She was nothing to him, and he found it easy to forget she was his wife, until her conduct gained his disapproval, and caused him to remind her that she owed him obedience.

The only thing was to hide and conquer her weakness, to fight it down as she had fought down many things before now; never to let him know that he possessed the power to break her heart. He, with his lovable, impulsive, buoyant nature, who took life so lightly and laughed away trouble, would not understand such a possibility, and might pity her as he pitied young Wyndham for his broken ribs.

Yet again, "Darling, no one will ever love you

as I do." Surely he knew how to love if such words, spoken with passionate tenderness, could ring out after long years, when the gates of subconsciousness were opened in delirium.

She felt wildly, miserably jealous of that woman wherever she was, dead or alive; and, leaning her forehead against the broken pillar of the old well, struggled hard to subdue the fierce overwhelming emotions that wrung her heart. "Where is your pluck, Flora? where is your pluck?" she whispered, clutching the rough stone convulsively.

The battle was not in vain—her courage returned at last; and when she entered young Wyndham's room an hour later, followed by Billi, he saw no trace of what she had gone through, but thought her particularly cheerful.

Evans lay in his bed ill, restless, sulky as a bear. He was angry with himself and the world in general, and inwardly cursed his bad luck, his temper, the climate, native servants, artillery subalterns as a class, Curly Wyndham in particular, and many things besides. After which he felt better.

In the afternoon Mrs Roberts came into Flora's room laughing, and leading Mr Liddon's big retriever. The sweeper (a low caste) had brought him across, it appeared, and to his collar

was tied a small note, in which a hole was pierced for the string to pass through. (It is not permissible to take anything from the hand of a sweeper.) It was evidently scribbled with a stylo pen :—

"Will you come over for five minutes? I have a letter that may interest you. I was in a vile temper this morning, and very rude, I'm afraid. If you will accept my apologies and come, I shall be grateful.—H. V. E."

The girl crushed the paper in her hand. She began to tremble, but controlled herself, and bent to caress the dog; then nodded and let him go, as she hastily pushed the note into the bosom of her dress. Before long she walked leisurely over to the bungalow.

He was lying in a deck-chair in the verandah. His face lit up as he saw her, and he moved as if to rise.

"Stay still," she said, and he held out the letter to her.

"It is from poor old Tom; perhaps you have heard—his wife is dead."

"Oh! No; I haven't heard. As I go back to-morrow, Katie has not sent on my letters."

"There was no humbug about it this time. She died soon after he arrived. Poor old chap! he is awfully cut up, of course."

"He would be. I think when any one is dead you forget their faults, and only remember that you were fond of them. Every hard thought you have ever had comes back, and hurts you far more than it could have hurt them."

Flora spoke sadly, and he knew that she was thinking of her own case. She leaned against a pillar in her neat grey habit, the white cat in her arms, a pathetic girlish figure, with a wistful face framed in dark soft hair which her ride had loosened. As she glanced over Tom's epistle she became aware that Evans was watching her intently; a slow painful blush mounted to her forehead, and she folded the letter hastily and buried her face in Billi's fur: he was very useful to her just then. She turned and looked out to the garden. He saw that she was breathing quickly. Presently she said—

"It is so like him to think that he was never half good enough to her. I suppose she was a very selfish woman, although I ought not to say it now she is dead."

"I can never see why people should be canonised because they have joined the majority. I

think she was young and silly, and didn't care for him properly. He fell in love with her pretty expressionless face, imagined she was an angel—well, we've all done that before now——"

She gave him a rapid glance; but his eyes were gazing into the distance, and he continued speculatively—

"I wonder why such good people, sound in every other respect, sometimes take a fancy to women or men who are not fit to tie their shoe-strings. Now my little sister——"

"Ellen?"

"Yes; how did you know?" He seemed surprised.

Flora did not look at him. A sudden impulse seized her, and she said dreamily, "I know her well. You were always together. She went fishing with you; and if she stayed at home, she always ran out to meet you in the evening, and called across the lawn and carried your basket. I can see it all—the sun on the river, the rooks flying to roost, the hayfield, the slanting shadows. You were a boy, and—you and she were as happy as the day was long."

"Tom told you?"

"No. I—I think I dreamt it—I must go——"

"Flora! Stop—don't go yet." She could not

see his face, but his voice besought her to be kind — the memory of bygone happiness had touched him. He caught her hand. She drew it away as quick as thought, and snatched up the cat as an excuse: she did not trust herself.

"Billi, don't escape; I have got some milk for you over there." Then to him. "No; I am afraid I must go: there are so many things to look after;" but she lingered a little, and chatted and laughed about Curly Wyndham and his conversational powers, told anecdotes of Mrs Roberts, her admiration for "the Major," and her request that she, Flora, would in future keep him away from "yon jail." "I told her she couldn't quite realise what an impossible task she wished to impose upon me."

The girl did not understand herself, and he was astonished at a mood hitherto unknown to him. She gave him no time to speak, but in a few minutes, with a quick "Good-bye," was off like a hare.

"She is the very devil," he said to himself—"a Will-o'-the-wisp. One moment you think you have caught her, and in another she lands you in a hole and makes you feel a fool."

He was sick of being alone, intensely bored with his own society. "Why couldn't she stay?

plague take her!" She puzzled and bewildered him: pictures of England and home on a cool summer's evening are as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land to sun-baked Indians. He wanted to hear more stories, he wanted to know how she had gained her information. Tom of course must have told her something; she had no doubt drawn on her imagination—correctly as it happened—for the rest. He wanted to watch her changing face, to tease her and make her blush again.

CHAPTER XVII.

On the following morning Evans was better. He still looked ill, but walked across early to the *dâk* bungalow.

"I thought you probably wouldn't come and bid me good-bye," he said to Flora.

"I intended to," she answered, speaking as she had the day before, in a bright indifferent way. "I thought it would be uncivil to do otherwise, when you had taken so much trouble on my account." She laughed.

He could not quite make her out.

"You will take Vagabond?" he said, inclined to be serious because she was gay.

"No; thank you very much all the same. But my own pony has come, I hear, so why should I deprive you of yours?"

She bustled in and out, preparing for the start.

"When are you coming to Gurmpore again?"

Flora did not answer at once, but bent down over some rugs she was fastening together: her back was towards him—she had ordered him into a chair.

"I can't think of anything that will take me there at present. Give my love to Mrs Latour and to Doreen; oh! a kiss to little Doreen."

"Very well; give it me and I will pass it on."

"What nonsense! Certainly not, and I dare say she can do without it."

"May I come to Muttiabad, Flora?"

"Of course; I don't see what there is to prevent it."

"You know what I mean," impatiently.

"I don't."

"Well, will you—will you treat me as you did the other day?"

"That depends. Are you going to Gurmpore to-morrow?"

"Yes. At least I shall stop at Sirkurbad with Selwyn on the way. I'm all right; but I think I'll take Mrs Roberts' advice and not go near the 'jail' again."

He rose and came across to where she was standing.

"Why won't you kiss me?" he asked abruptly. "Is it a very unusual request?"

Flora drew back and grew white. Her heart beat; she was afraid he would see that she was trembling.

"No; but I—I——"

"You would rather not? I know that is what you were going to say. Will you always refuse everything I ask? Suppose I take the law into my own hands, what then?"

He caught her fingers and drew her towards him.

"He is playing with me," she thought bitterly, noticing a well-known twinkle in his eyes: she had seen it when he had teased her at Rosewood.

"If—if people don't love each other, it—is a mockery," she said, the colour flying to her face again.

He let her hands drop, and became serious in a moment.

"I remember—when people wish to try and forget each other's existence you mean?"

Flora turned quickly; her own passionate words, which had caused such deep self-reproach, thrown back at her thus, hit hard. With a swift impulsive movement she put her hand on his sleeve and gazed at him mutely, her eyes full of distress: just then she was only a helpless

appealing girl, eager to atone. And he, roused out of his lighter mood, stood and looked down at her, rigid and affronted, with a frown on his brow.

"Why do you remind me of it?" she said, in a low voice controlled with difficulty. "Don't you think I am sorry—very sorry—horribly sorry, and—and ashamed? Can't you forgive me?"

"It was my fault," he answered simply. Then he did take the law into his own hands, for he bent and kissed her, but quietly, soberly, on the forehead.

This salute partook so peculiarly of the nature of a priestly benediction that Jimmie's mocking soul would have been filled with wonder and mirth; but if Hugh had recalled certain remarks of his young brother's, and if Mrs Roberts had not just then announced her arrival by a great clatter, he might have been tempted to repeat the experiment with less moderation. As it was he exclaimed forcibly, showing some confusion—

"Confound her!—I will go and say good-bye to Wyndham," and departed precipitately.

Flora, with a quick gesture, pressed her hands to her breast, threw back her head, and drew a short gasping breath. Mrs Roberts happened to be on her knees in a corner, or she would

have feared what she called a "fit o' riggles"; but when she looked up Mrs Evans was quietly finishing the packing.

They all drove off before long; Hugh Evans watched them until they were out of sight. "What a knack she has of making a fellow lay down his arms!" he said to himself, and with a sigh went back to his bungalow and Billi.

At the station at Muttiabad Lady Campbell met the party. Mr Wyndham was to stay with her for a week until he could return to his duties.

The little lady looked radiant, and squeezed Flora's arm hard as she kissed her.

"Oh, dear, I want to have you alone," she whispered. "Wait until we get rid of this tiresome boy."

"You are brimming over with something," Flora said, smiling.

When they reached the bungalow she was forcibly pulled into the dining-room, where her letters lay on the table. Curiously enough, there were two black-edged envelopes — one in Tom Tremaine's handwriting.

"O Flora, just think what has happened!" cried Lady Puff. "I have been dying to tell you. You know old Cousin Angus M'Pherson?

Well, if he hasn't died, the dear, and left his money to be divided between you and George!"

Flora stared at her blankly.

"I don't understand."

"Of course it isn't very much—about a thousand a-year each; but I am so delighted for your sake, you darling, and of course it is very useful to us."

The meaning of it all began to enter the girl's brain at last; she flushed deeply. In a moment her thoughts flew back to past years, to the miserable necessary economies, the fight for bare existence at times, and the terrible mistake into which lack of money had thrown her. What irony it seemed: yet even then she remembered the penury had been caused by unhappy circumstances, without which they would have possessed enough and to spare. As the only son of a rich man, she told herself fondly, excusing his weaknesses, Dick might have been different, but one thousand a-year would have gone with the rest.

"I don't want it," she said bitterly. "I wish he had left it all to George: of what use is it to me now?"

"You dear thing, I am surprised at you. You will soon understand all it means; you will be so

independent, and can do what you like, and see what you like."

"I have enough freedom as it is."

She thought of the man in the lonely police bungalow. What would he say and think? He need not now feel it necessary to offer her ponies or money, or even the use of his house. Her cheeks burned, and she exclaimed passionately, to the astonishment of her friend—

"I hate money! I would far sooner be without it."

"My dear child, you are really ridiculous. I must tell Puff that; his face will be as good as a play. Why, we have been planning it already; you can have ponies and a smart cart, and dresses —oh, we'll both send for a box from London or Paris at once!"

Sir George smiled when he heard how Flora had received the good news, and assured her that the calamity of being left a considerable sum of money was one which possessed alleviations.

"I have heard of people growing unhappy because they have inherited a fortune, but I never believed it until now," Lady Campbell said, as time went on and Flora failed to recover her spirits. She began to suspect that

other causes for her depression existed, and longed to know what had taken place at the *dâk* bungalow after her departure. Tact prevented her from questioning the girl; but she subjected Mr Wyndham to a clever cross-examination, and he supplied her with all possible information without becoming aware that she was bent on anything but a desire to know how he had fared in the impromptu hospital during her absence.

The information he gave her, however, was misleading and imperfect. As far as he knew, Major Evans and his wife had met daily, and had certainly parted with regret—that is to say, on his side.

In spite of an increase of means, Flora decided to stay in her little bungalow. She had a tendency still to let things remain unchanged, using the argument that she alone was concerned, and therefore it did not matter.

But Lady Puff was most indefatigable in her determination to "stir her up." It gave her much more pleasure, her husband declared, to turn her cousin into a well-to-do lady, and to make her buy pretty clothes and decorate her house, than it did to enjoy her own portion of the newly acquired wealth.

"I am sure you were fond of dolls when you were a child, Katie," Flora said one day; "you take such pleasure in dressing me."

She was standing, an unwilling victim, arrayed in a dainty garment of black chiffon and jet, the creation of a Paris modiste, which made the creamy whiteness of her neck and arms gleam like marble by contrast.

"Of course I do, and I'm glad you submit with a good grace. I am enchanted that I have succeeded in forcing you to get a few decent gowns. Remember, however much you try to ignore it, you are Mrs Hugh Evans, and therefore have no right to dress badly. I am sure he is the last man to like his wife to be dowdy."

"I quite agree with you," the girl answered, not without bitterness; "but the difficulty lies in the fact that I can never be anything but dowdy."

In reply Lady Campbell drew her to a long mirror that hung against the wall, crying—

"You dear goose, look at yourself in the glass, and just repeat that remark if you dare. Ah, you can't help laughing and blushing. You must confess that you look exceptionally nice: you only want a few diamonds—a little tiara—which Hugh will give you some day, no doubt. I am

not at all sure that he hasn't it already; for he told me once that a lot of jewels were in a bank at home, but he had not seen them since his mother's death."

"I don't care for jewels."

"Oh, you are so very superior. I wish I could make you a wee bit silly, dearie."

"I am sillier than you think," said Flora with a sigh; and when the little lady had gone, she sat down in a dim corner of her drawing-room, covered her eyes with her hand, and for once in a way gave her thoughts full play.

What had been the meaning of his question, "May I come to Muttiabad?" and of the look in his face as he stood watching them drive away from the *dâk* bungalow?

True, she had convicted him of trifling with her, and he had kissed her as a brother might have done, yet he had undoubtedly felt sorry to lose them. Them? Yes, but why should she be such a fool as to imagine that she personally had caused his regret? Probably a surfeit of his own society in the Liddons' bungalow had been quite sufficient to account for it; and had he wished to see her again, he would have stopped at Muttiabad on his way back to Gurmpore.

The possibility of his coming seemed to be slipping farther and farther away. Yet it was difficult to stifle hope, which would creep into her heart, born of some trifle such as the glimpse she had caught in the mirror of a new and brilliant Flora, who looked to her strange and hitherto unknown. She cast a glance round her, and involuntarily the question came, "How will he like it?" That chair must be his: would he notice the photograph of Giroflé, which had been given her by a former owner, and held a place of honour?

The little drawing-room might have belonged to an English country-house: on the wall was a delicate blue paper; pale chintzes covered the chairs and sofas. A few good pieces of furniture stood against the walls, on which were bits of choice china; a slender-legged Chippendale table held a Worcester bowl full of roses. Indian ornaments were conspicuous by their absence.

Cynics from time immemorial have asserted that members of the gentler sex are prone to be ungenerous towards each other, and that jealousy and want of sympathy exclude an impartial judgment of their sisters' charms or shortcomings. But many of the unwritten histories of the world

show what one woman can do and has done for another—through untiring kindness, thought, and a silent study and understanding of that second self which lies beneath the surface.

Lady Campbell, in her quiet happy way, brought a strong and subtle influence to bear on her newly acquired cousin. She realised fully that Flora's true nature had been cramped and warped, and determined that it should now have full play, and that prosperity must bring back a belief in herself, and consequently in the possibility of personal happiness.

The girl did not guess this deep-laid plot, but unconsciously she gained confidence and dignity. It was Katie who urged her to cultivate her natural artistic tastes, and to furnish her rooms according to her own ideas, instead of indifferently following a conventional plan. It was Katie who suggested the purchase of a pretty pair of country-bred ponies and a neat phaeton, and who remarked, with artless enthusiasm, that Hugh would be sure to approve of them. Katie, too, made it appear that it was almost a duty to see a certain number of friends, and not to become a recluse.

The consequence of all this was that Flora gradually threw off more and more the cloak

of reserve and coldness that had enveloped her for years of her life, and which she had only partially discarded. The trammels of poverty no longer held her in their thrall, and she began to understand what it was to be a considered and courted woman. A window had opened into a new life: with all the heartache, hope deferred, and longing to see the man she loved (which at times was so strong that it seemed as if it must pierce space and call him to her side), the very happiness of loving, even without return, filled her whole being with something that loosed the misery and iron which had kept her soul in harness. The wellspring of an almost unknown youth sprang up and wrapped the world in tender light.

But this could not last; and when restlessness and despondency overpowered her, and her thoughts wandered from the duties she had undertaken, it seemed almost too hard to bear. Then she would ride out alone across the dry plains, refusing all offers of companionship, and galloping for miles, until Nature, the great mother, soothed and comforted her, and her courage came again.

Young Wyndham now and then tried her sorely, and involuntarily forced upon her the

knowledge that her position of a wife living apart from her husband was just as much a false one as when she had met him daily at the practice-camp.

"Curly" liked Major Evans; but his devotion to Flora caused him to resent what he called his unpardonable neglect of his charming wife. Boylike, he could not help at times giving vent to his feelings, and naïvely repeating remarks he had heard made on the subject.

A certain Mrs Clench, a lady of not untarnished reputation, who was separated from her husband because of an inability to keep the peace, and—it was whispered—owing to certain proceedings on her part scarcely to her credit, had raised his ire by openly claiming Flora as a sister in misfortune (she posed as the victim of a man's diabolical temper, whereas Captain Clench was gentlemanly and good-natured).

"How can a woman like that dare to class herself with you!" the young fellow exclaimed one day, growing very red in the face. "It is impertinent of me to say anything, Mrs Evans; but I can't bear to hear it—I——"

Flora coloured. "It doesn't matter what disagreeable people say."

"It does matter," he continued, walking up

and down the room and spluttering with wrath; "it is abominable. *I* can't stop it, yet it should be stopped. I daresay you'll be angry with me, but I must say it—Major Evans should stop it. Why does he allow you to be insulted by these people? It's not playing the game—there, it's out at last, and I——"

Flora interrupted quickly. "Don't say anything more or I shall be angry," she said in a low voice, with rather a tremulous laugh. "We—my husband and I—understand each other; we are the best of friends. My dear boy, if you want to do me a good turn, tell them to mind their own business."

"That means I am to mind mine?"

"Perhaps."

"I can't help it," he replied huskily. "What concerns you will always be—you know I—well, I'd better go, or I shall make a fool of myself. Good night."

He walked back to his quarters with a lump in his throat, and Flora let fall a few hot tears, which sprang from wounded pride and humiliation. Such scenes hurt her sorely—not so much Mrs Clench's amiable suggestions, as Curly Wyndham's championship of herself, and the evident fact that he considered her slighted and

neglected by her husband. Her belief that she could face the world as if she had still been Flora Niel began to fail her like many another.

It seemed that, in spite of Evans' wishes and her endeavours, huge insurmountable barriers were closing round them, against which they might batter in vain for freedom. What were these walls, mighty yet invisible? Surely not that empty marriage tie, but something stronger far,—necessity from which there could be no escape, inexorable fate that might mean happiness or misery. The old feeling of a caged bird came back, and she longed to fly to the ends of the earth, to hide herself and forget.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE polo tournament at Muttiabad was the event of the year. Men and ponies from all parts were present at it, and it became a great meeting-place for friends from south and north.

"Major Evans is certain to come down for it," more than one person said to Flora, and she began to look forward to the week of festivities with feverish excitement and dread.

She had never willingly seen polo played since Dick's sad death, and the sight of the ground at Muttiabad, with its white-shirted, white-helmeted riders, scampering hither and thither on their eager ponies, was naturally peculiarly painful to her.

She remained at home, watching the strangers drive and ride past her bungalow: the shouts from the distant polo-ground made her shiver.

Every one but Lady Campbell seemed too engrossed to remember her. That little lady

came morning and afternoon to cheer her up, as she said.

"Why don't you go for a good ride, you dear, in the opposite direction?" she asked.

"I have lent the ponies to Mr Wilmot and Captain Arkwright."

"Just like you; and here you sit and mope. Your cheeks are burning; don't get ill."

Flora could not make up her mind to ask the question which was on her lips, but her cousin seemed to guess her thoughts.

"I haven't seen Hugh yet," she said carelessly; "probably he will come to-morrow."

But several to-morrows passed and he did not appear. The third and last day, as the hours went by, it became evident that it was not his intention to attend the tournament.

Many expressed surprise even in Flora's presence, and some one said, "It is the first time he has missed it."

She grew very pale; but the innocent blundering author of this remark was happily too engrossed in discussing the play of his regimental team to notice the effect of his words.

The girl did not think for a moment that her husband's absence might have been caused by anything but a relapse of his former avoidance

of her. She had not realised how much she had allowed herself to build on the thought of seeing him at the tournament, and now became more than ever convinced that nothing but the interest of the hour, the moment, had caused him to soften at their last meeting. Like one overwhelmed by a grave disaster, too serious for lesser emotions, she rallied her powers: a desperate calm took possession of her, and she determined to face and accept the inevitable. The inevitable in this case meant a lonely life, meetings at long intervals, which would be more trying than separation, and the weary unconquerable longing for a happiness that could never come.

But the struggle for patience and submission was a hard one: if she banished thought of him by day, and determined to try and enjoy the pleasures her money had brought, she dreamt of him at night, quarrelled with him, and forgave him a hundred times over.

Tom Tremaine stopped at Muttiabad on his way back to Gurmpore, and used to call every day and tell her of his troubles. "It does me good to talk to you," he said; "you are the first who has made me feel better."

She thought him a very pathetic figure just then.

"She was so sweet," he said with a gulp, speaking one day of his wife; "and I never saw her look prettier, her eyes large, and with such a colour. Once she said that she could not have borne the food and the native servants in India; but that if I had only given it up and gone to live with her aunt in Cheltenham and got something to do there, it would have been all right."

Flora did not know how to answer. "You must be thankful you arrived in time," she said evasively.

"Yes; but I felt such a selfish brute. I suppose if a man marries he ought to think more of his wife, and even sacrifice his career."

"I don't think you need blame yourself, and no doubt she was quite happy in Cheltenham."

"Yes; she was so good, always doing good things—secretary to a girl's sociable society or something, and to a guild for making young women of the lower classes educate themselves and write essays. Miss Armytage, who looks upon me as a fiend in human shape, said that the parson there thought her a perfect saint. He was awfully cut up, poor chap—I felt very sorry for him. The day before she died, she held out her hand to me, and said, 'I like to have you, Tibbins' (she used to call me Tibbins long ago),

and it reminded me of the time when we were engaged, and she seemed fond of me. I wish I could have asked her to forgive me then; but I choked somehow: it is difficult to get over the things one might have done."

Here Tom rose and went to the window, to hide two tears that were rolling down his cheeks. He had received a letter from Hugh Evans at Bombay: after a little he began to speak of him.

"I think he is rather down in his luck. It was from him I first heard of your good fortune," he remarked.

"What—what did he say?" She rose and arranged some flowers Tremaine had brought, in a glass bowl.

"Oh, I forget! I think he said he was glad, and that it had always troubled him that you wouldn't take—— Dear me, what a pity!—you haven't cut your hand?" The bowl lay in pieces on the floor.

"Is he ill? has he had fever again?" Flora asked a little later.

"He—who? Selwyn? We were talking of him, weren't we?"

"Oh, were we? Yes; but I meant my—Major Evans."

"No, I think it must be liver; however, I shall soon find out when I get back. Oh yes; by the way, I remember he said that he had been told you were one of the most popular women in Muttiabad."

"Indeed! That is a piece of news: it is wonderful what money can do."

"Mrs Evans, isn't he—aren't things better between you? I hoped when I heard you were down at the Artillery practice-camp together that——"

"They are no worse and no better," she interrupted, and laughed. "I don't suppose we shall ever do anything but quarrel—what is the use of talking about it? I am quite happy, and so is he."

This was conclusive, and Tom said no more.

She determined to stay in the plains as usual during the hot weather; but Lady Campbell had not been well, and Sir George made up his mind that his wife should go to Simla, and begged his cousin to accompany her. Therefore the two ladies finally settled to take a house together in the great hill-station.

They had to travel through Gurmpore to get to Kalka, the terminus at the foot of the hills,

and Flora was tossed hither and thither by a dozen perplexing thoughts and wishes. Would not Mrs M'Cormack and Sister Pretty think it strange if she passed them without stopping? Yet the old difficulty presented itself, and now it seemed an absolute impossibility to her to offer another visit to Rosewood, especially as her husband was at home.

Lady Campbell, however, who had her own ideas on the subject, came unexpectedly to the rescue.

"The Haggetts have offered me their bungalow at Gurmpore," she remarked innocently, "if we wish to stay there *en route*. What do you feel? I expect you would like a day or so in the old place."

"I think I should," Flora answered quietly; but in spite of all her schooling her heart began to beat. "I have so many friends there."

"Mrs Latour?"

"Well, no; but Mrs M'Cormack——"

"And Doreen perhaps. You old humbug! I don't suppose you care twopence whether you meet that horrid fascinating husband of yours or not."

"It would be unfortunate if I did; for, at

any rate, if I care little, he certainly cares less."

"Oh, you are two stupid people! and as for Hugh, I have no patience with him, and long to tell him so."

So it was decided. Flora wrote to Tom Tremaine—for she knew that he was in daily communication with his friend—but in order not to appear entirely neglectful of her husband, scribbled a hasty card at the station, telling him that she and Lady Campbell intended staying two days at Gurmpore, and asking him to come and see them the following morning (twelve o'clock is, strange to say, the calling hour in India).

Tom was absent, and the letter followed him; he returned just in time to meet the ladies at the station. As ill-luck would have it, on his way there he came across Sister Pretty, to whom he mentioned his destination, and she a quarter of an hour later at a gymkana imparted the information to Mrs Latour. The result was that when that lady came face to face with Major Evans, who was watching the lemon-cutting, she could not resist exclaiming sweetly (she had grown cautious since her experiences at Rosewood)—

"Oh, Major Evans, I *am* pleased to hear that Mrs Evans is arriving this afternoon! I hope I shall see her. Really Mr Tremaine's devotion to you both is very touching. I hear he has just gone down to meet her. It is tiresome for you to be kept by this stupid gymkana. Sister Pretty was only saying this morning——"

But the observation in which Miss Pretty had indulged remained unknown. The nurse herself pulled Mrs Latour's skirts sharply, and Evans merely gave her a haughty stare and said nothing. Somehow she never failed to get the worst of it when indulging in a "round" with the Major.

"He is judging, and couldn't leave of course. For heaven's sake, Mrs Latty, don't give me away," whispered Sister Pretty, with a guilty feeling that her love of gossip had led her to discuss her friend's affairs rather freely, and to suggest that if only Mrs Tremaine had seen fit to depart this life a year sooner, things might have arranged themselves very differently.

"Trust me, dear: I never intended to tell him what you did say; but I like taking him down."

Nevertheless she bit her lip, and the other

woman smiled to herself and thought that at times a look can do more than words.

Perhaps Mrs Latour would have been better satisfied had she known that her shaft went home and did its evil work. Hugh Evans rode back in gloomy wrath. He was not a touchy man, but he felt that his wife had placed him in a humiliating position. The whole station apparently knew of her arrival in Gurmpore, and she had not troubled to send him a line. Tom, moreover, had been specially informed. An uncomfortable gnawing jealousy of Tremaine, which had long smouldered, awoke to life. He recalled Flora's warm mention of him as her best friend, and the blush that had risen to her face as she read his letter announcing that he was a free man. Of course it was plain enough; but for himself, but for the miserable farce that all the same was a marriage as fast as any could be, those two would have "made it up," and Tom, who deserved the best that life could give, would have been happy. But Flora? When he thought of her, sober reflections vanished, a tumult of feeling took possession of him, and he was like an unreasonable boy. What right had she to ignore him, to send for another to meet her, however old a friend he might be? What right to come to Gurmpore

without warning him beforehand, thereby forcing him to listen to the impertinent insinuations of a malicious woman? It was the old story. In spite of all he had said and done, she would not remember that she was his wife, and he would submit to it no longer. He did not take into consideration that he was losing even the small hold he had on her by absenting himself so entirely, and refusing the invitations that Lady Campbell had privately sent him. The news of her good fortune had come as an unpleasant surprise. He would not have allowed this, but it was so all the same. "I'll be hanged if I'll go near her or give her a chance of saying I am after her money," he had said inwardly; "she wouldn't have anything to do with mine." And so he wrapped himself up in his work, and determined to follow her own advice and to forget her existence.

Jimmie and Bob were at Gurmpore just then for a few days, having come there in pursuit of a pony which was on view at the gymkana. They were as lively and irrepressible as ever, and when they heard accidentally of Flora's arrival, looked forward with some excitement to "a real lark," hoping devoutly that a good chance would offer for "the pulling of old Hugh's leg."

When Hugh had returned to Mount Abato alone, and had told the two with evident satisfaction that he and his wife had amicably agreed to separate, they had wondered, becoming confirmed in their suspicious that old Hugh had been "let in."

He had given them no further information, and they had asked no questions; but as he appeared to be in the best of spirits and much relieved by this singular arrangement, the comic side of the situation soon became once more uppermost in their minds.

They had heard little since, and had made it a point of honour not to speak to others of a matter upon which Hugh himself had chosen to be silent.

Jimmie was surprised that his brother did not inform him of his wife's presence in Gurmpore. In the evening, having waited impatiently for the announcement, he could contain himself no longer, and remarked, observing Hugh with an aggressive air of innocent concern—

"There is something in the atmosphere to-night that reminds me of our parting at Mount Abato when you were on your honeymoon and went down to Muttiabad in the heat,—a certain depression. If it wasn't that I knew Mrs Hugh

to be miles away, I should think——" But he got no further; his brother turned on him.

"Don't play the ass," he said sharply. "I wonder if you will ever grow more sensible, Jimmie; there's room for improvement."

Then he rose abruptly and went out, banging the door after him.

Jimmie retired into his shell, a locality not often favoured with his presence. Hugh very rarely snubbed him.

"Oh ho," said Bob, who had been a silent witness of this scene, "sits the wind in that quarter? My friend, we must proceed with caution."

Very few things disturbed Hugh Evans' rest as a rule; but that night he did not sleep well, and rose much earlier than usual for his ride. Where was she? The morning hours changed the current of his thoughts somewhat; a sudden fierce longing to see her, and exasperation at his helplessness, seized him. The knowledge that in order to ascertain her whereabouts he must seek information from Tremaine, humiliated and wounded him keenly; his consequent anger settled on his unoffending and unconscious friend. After breakfast he would ride to Tom's office and give him a bit of his mind. It was intolerable, not to be borne;

more than once it occurred to him that Mrs Latour might have invented the whole thing through pure mischief.

The post-card and a charming epistle from Lady Campbell, which lay on the table when he returned, somewhat mollified him. The little lady explained very pleasantly their sudden resolve to stay two days at Gurmpore, and that she had persuaded Flora to accompany her to Simla. Her letter was dated a day earlier than the card, but had evidently been delayed.

"I have a lot of work; I don't think I shall be able to manage to go and see them," he said to himself; yet when twelve o'clock came he was already on his way to their bungalow. But he felt out of tune, embarrassed, torn by conflicting emotions.

CHAPTER XIX.

FLORA was alone when Hugh Evans entered: she rose and held out her hand with a smile of welcome. She was becomingly dressed, looked well and bright, and appeared so entirely unconscious of having given cause for offence that his resolution to show his displeasure was defeated. He spoke very little, and felt awkward and unlike himself. This easy confident manner, that she had first adopted during their last meeting, disconcerted him and placed him at a disadvantage. With his knowledge of her changed circumstances, the undoubted and unusual air of prosperity and sprightliness about her, of which she was herself unaware, seemed to alter her curiously and to place them miles asunder.

He watched her gloomily as she chattered of many things—told him of her ponies, her house, the polo tournament, &c., and asked an infinity of questions, gazing the while with heightened

colour and shining eyes at the squirrels and king crows in the compound.

"How absorbed she is in it all!" he thought with irritation; and said, following his own reflections—

"Rosewood is a poor place to offer you nowadays; but if you had let me know sooner that you were coming here, I would have cleared out and left it for you—the master of the house being the chief objection."

Flora turned her eyes on him at last; a look shot into them that he did not understand. She reddened angrily—

"I see you can't help saying something disagreeable to me, even though——"

"Even though?"

"We haven't met for so long."

The word implied a reproach; he was contrite at once.

"I beg your pardon."

"I wanted to ask if you would take me—us—to Rosewood this evening. I wish to see Vagabond and Giroflé and the garden."

"With pleasure; I thought you might be going somewhere with Tom."

"Mr Tremaine? Not that I know of."

"And you are bound for Simla?"

"Yes."

"I am off to England at once almost for six months' leave."

"Indeed." She rose and went towards the verandah; there was no Billi to help her now.

"I have got the little old place at home in North Wales, and I'm obliged to look after it: there are various things to be decided which my man doesn't feel equal to undertaking on his own responsibility."

"You will enjoy it, I expect."

"I don't want to go a bit." She gave him a swift side-glance from under her lashes. He was standing beside her, and continued dismally, without observing it, "I would much rather be shooting in Kashmir."

"It is a lovely country, certainly."

Here followed commonplaces about the scenery of that exquisite valley, the river Jhelum, the *mahseer*,[1] the plane-trees, &c., until Lady Campbell appeared.

Half an hour later, when her husband had gone, Flora caught her little friend by the arm—

"Katie, you won't get out of coming with me this afternoon. I saw that you were trying your

[1] A fish.

best to do so. I—I want you to see the garden, and Giroflé, and—lots of things."

"You needn't pinch my arm until it's black and blue. I think I am rather tired——"

"You know that is an excuse—I want you to come. I won't go if you don't; he—he is so—so rude to me, and—I can't bear it. I don't wish—to be alone with him."

"Why not, you goose? I am sure you are a match for him any day."

"Oh, I don't know; I can't explain."

"And you impose upon me the pleasant part of gooseberry?"

"You will make two people more comfortable if you come; in fact, I won't——"

"Oh, very well, very well; I'll do as I'm told."

That evening Mrs Latour enjoyed the doubtful pleasure of meeting Major Evans as he drove his wife and Lady Campbell down to Rosewood.

Flora was looking her best in a neat Paris gown and pretty hat. It would have been difficult for an acquaintance to recognise in her the reserved, apparently negative girl, so indifferent about her appearance, of a year before. Being anxious to show that she wished bygones to be bygones, she made her husband pull up, and inquired after Doreen, inviting her to breakfast the follow-

ing day. The fair lady smiled amiably: she might have been Flora's dearest friend. She watched them as they drove off with a puzzled expression on her face, they all seemed so happy and prosperous: undoubtedly the Evans mystery was difficult to fathom.

And they were happy; for the time all differences and difficulties slept. Lady Campbell was enchanted with the garden, and declared she only looked forward to the time when "Puff" would have a five years' appointment.

A tea-table, laden with enough dainties for ten, was spread under the trees amongst flowers and ferns, and the two ladies lay back luxuriously on the cushions of low basket-chairs. It was not too hot: the sweet rose scent and a faint odour of jessamine filled the air; the splash of a tiny fountain gave a sense of coolness, and the indescribably lazy enjoyment and languor of an Indian evening fell upon them pleasantly.

Crows, perched in the tree over their heads, stood watching until they could with safety pounce down and make off with a biscuit or piece of cake, and the squirrels chirped shrilly in the branches.

Pickle, who had welcomed Flora with enthusiasm, could not be persuaded to move from

her knee when her husband asked rather apologetically if she would make tea. Lady Campbell, looking on, noticed a certain diffidence in him which was new, and made her wonder. No one felt inclined to talk; but she filled up pauses with gossip from Muttiabad, and pointedly asked Evans why he had not come for the tournament.

"We all looked out for you, and all missed you very much," she said.

"You make yourself responsible for a good deal," he answered, laughing rather awkwardly, and turning for the fifth time to press some very indigestible and highly coloured cakes on his guests.

"I do so in perfect faith; but answer my question at once."

"About the tournament? Oh, that is easy enough: I am far too busy a man to be able often to indulge in such dissipation."

"Nonsense! do you expect me to believe that?" The little lady smiled.

Flora sat silent and watched her husband's face. Evans' confusion was evident, and she felt confirmed in the conclusion she had come to on the last day of the polo, when hope had died in her heart.

Afterwards they strolled into the house.

"This drawing-room could be made charming," Lady Campbell remarked, as she glanced critically round; "it is much too bachelory now."

"Pipes on the mantelpiece, you mean," said Evans, reddening slightly. "This verandah is the scene of the rout of the great Mrs Latty," he added, laughing, and looking at his wife as he spoke.

Flora smiled; but her eyes fell before his. He continued—

"And you said she was perfectly in the right all the time."

"I never did!" indignantly.

"What was it all about?" inquired Lady Puff, who had received an imperfect account of the affair.

"She was rude to me, and—he very politely turned her out of the house," Flora replied hastily.

She was subdued, gentle, content that evening; and many a time later dreamt of it, as we dream in the cheerlessness of winter of a balmy summer's day, of the peaceful wood-dove's note in tender green trees, of azure skies and murmuring waters where swallows linger.

Afterwards the two boys, who were leaving that evening, strolled in, quiet and demure, with an expression of shy reverence on their faces which filled Hugh with alarm, knowing as he did that it usually preceded some special piece of villainy. However, if they had meditated evil of any kind, their mood soon changed, for the sight of two such graceful ladies in dainty white dresses, around whom hung an atmosphere subtle and indescribable, completely disconcerted them. As Jimmie expressed it later, he was "knocked all of a heap."

Flora's love of boys stood her in good stead, and she was soon laughing and chattering with her young brother-in-law, to whom she felt drawn at once, — he was so like, yet so unlike, her husband.

That gentleman half resented the fact that Jimmie promptly and entirely monopolised his wife. As they walked back from the stables through the compound, his attention wandered from Lady Campbell while listening to scraps of a brisk conversation between the two, which seemed to cause both much amusement. It was nothing but nonsense, of course, in which Jimmie delighted. Flora also appeared to like it.

"I wish she would talk nonsense to me,"

Hugh said to himself; and then his thoughts flew back to that last evening at the policeman's bungalow, when she had told him fairy tales of his youth, standing with the white cat in her arms, and vanishing, accompanied by her furry "familiar," as soon as she had absorbed his interest and excited his fancy.

Lady Puff's voice and good-tempered, rather mischievous, laugh roused him from his reverie.

"Cousin Hugh, I have asked you twice whether you know the name of that funny tree with the pink flowers."

"She's a ripper!" Jimmie asserted with decision when the ladies had left, and Bob echoed—

"A ripper; by Jove! yes."

Hugh did not contradict them: he looked pleased and self-conscious.

The young fellows were now filled with astonishment at old Hugh's insensibility as regards such an "attractive, well-bred woman," for such Jimmie pronounced Flora to be, with the air of a connoisseur, when his first enthusiasm had evaporated in slang.

"I am not at all sure that I shall not give the old chap a good sound bit of advice," he added.

But the remembrance of the reproof administered by his brother on the previous day, and

something in Hugh's manner, caused him to relinquish his benevolent intention.

When Hugh Evans got back to his bungalow that night, after driving the boys to the station, he glanced round the sitting-room and said to himself that Lady Campbell was right,—it did look empty and dreary.

He sat in the verandah and smoked as usual, with Pickle on his knee. The rings of smoke went up, and with them many thoughts.

Yes; he came to a conclusion at last. Things could not go on as they were at present. It was his duty, his most undoubted duty, to put an end to what the girl had herself allowed to be a false position. Evidently her friendship with Tom Tremaine caused gossip which must be stopped. Of course the whole thing had been a mistake, a curious prank on the part of Fate; but the only way now was to submit to her decrees, and fight no longer against the situation. He recalled the events of the past months—the practice-camp, his own restless irritability, caused of course by a feeling that things were not as they should be. True, he had never thought of saddling himself with a wife; but perhaps after all—— How sweet she had looked, how shy and young! the ready blush, so easily called up by a glance or teasing word,

transformed her. He laughed suddenly, and Pickle jumped down offended. Yes, perhaps after all——

Yet how to approach her? That must be cautiously planned and thought out. The blue rings ascended, and deep reflection ensued.

"It's not in my line. How do fellows manage these things? She's a little *diablesse*, and there's every chance that to-morrow I shall find her in a different temper altogether. I must be moderate and not rouse her: it will only be a case of ten minutes at the station, and I must put it plainly."

These meditations resulted in a determination to prepare Flora's mind for the future by a carefully worded speech at parting.

"*Do you feel disposed to reconsider your decision on my return from England?*" Nothing about duty or obedience should be mentioned this time: he had learnt his lesson. "*Taking everything into consideration, would it not be wiser?*" &c. "*During my absence, will you try and think over the proposal I once made, that you should make my home yours?*" It was difficult: on the whole the third sentence recommended itself to him. "*During my absence, will you try,*" &c. It showed that he was anxious to give her time to think over the

matter and not to coerce her in any way: he would go up to Simla on his return for his answer.

But "L'homme propose," &c. When Hugh Evans drove to the station the next morning, he at once caught sight of his wife in earnest conversation with Tom Tremaine. Had he known it, the subject they were discussing so eagerly as they walked to and fro on the platform was one that he would have considered most dry and uninteresting, connected with a scheme which had been working in Flora's head for some time. He did not attempt to interrupt them, but talked to Lady Campbell.

Several minutes passed before they became aware of his presence, then Tom made an excuse and went to look after the luggage; Lady Puff followed him, and husband and wife were left alone. All he intended to say vanished entirely. He stood at her side in gloomy silence; she too seemed to have lost the power of speech, and sought in vain for inspiration.

"It is wonderful what loads the natives can carry," she remarked at last, watching a man labouring under a large bundle of bedding.

"Yes; they are wiry beggars."

"They look such miserable creatures. No one ever told me before I came to India what an abject individual the ordinary native is."

"They are certainly very different to the hill-tribes—Afghans, Sikhs, &c."

"The Goorkhas, too."

"Yes. Goorkhas are more like Japs—splendid little chaps."

The train puffed in. Cold fingers seemed to take her by the throat. "He is going, he is going; shall I ever see him again?" were the words coursing through her brain. And he said to himself, "What a blessed fool I am!" The only observation he could think of was, "I am afraid you will have a hot journey,"—he repeated it twice.

Lady Campbell bustled up: there was general confusion.

A silent handshake and they separated. Flora grew very white; but as they steamed away, she smiled and waved her hand.

Evans uttered a short and forcible word of four letters, looked up, and found himself face to face with Tom Tremaine. They walked out of the station together without a word. The jealousy he had conquered for a day rose like a cloud and blinded his reason. He turned on his friend.

"I feel it is my duty to ask you," he said stiffly, "to be more careful in your intercourse with — my wife. I know you would be the last to wish to compromise her in any way——"

Tom glanced at him quickly. Something in Evans' voice took him by surprise. He grew rather pale.

"I don't understand you."

"I can put it more plainly if you like. You say you are anxious that we should hit it off better, but—you have come between us all along. That's God's truth!" he burst out, as if the power to control himself had gone. "I might have made her love me — I don't say that I haven't been a d——d fool from the beginning, and I don't deny that but for my folly you could—I mean—— Yet, after all, she belongs to me. If she is talked about, the responsibility is mine."

Tom turned round. There was a look in his face of pain and reproach. Presently he said quietly—

"You are off your chump a bit, old man, or you wouldn't say what you have. I'll tell you the truth — I have suspected it for some time. No duty or responsibility moves you at the

present moment. You are simply in love with your own wife, and in consequence unreasonably jealous. For God's sake, don't let anything of that kind come between you and me. I honour and reverence her; she is the truest and best woman I have ever known. But there—I tell you plainly she looks on me as she might on a faithful dog, who will fetch and carry and do her bidding as a matter of course. I am grateful for her friendship, and I hope I shall keep it to the end of my life."

Hugh Evans did not speak at once. Tom's words sank deeply. If the truth were known, he felt heartily ashamed of his outbreak.

"Forgive me, old chap; I beg your pardon," he said unsteadily. "No; we won't let a woman come between us at the eleventh hour. I know it's not true. As she said herself, you are the best friend she has in the world, but I—am so infernally miserable, I hardly knew what I was saying. She doesn't care two brass farthings for me, and never will, I believe. I have not gone the right way to work, I suppose. Well, the whole thing was a hopeless bit of insanity: the worst is, I've only myself to thank for it. I wish I'd kicked the bucket then, as a wiser man than myself would have done."

"Nonsense." Tom did not quite know what to answer. Flora had certainly never given him cause to believe that she was in the least inclined to care for her husband. "It may all come right some day," he added dubiously.

"I don't see the least chance of it. She talked to me just now about the characteristics of native tribes."

"And what did you say?"

"I? Oh I—I'm not sure what I said."

"She wants to take up nursing——"

"A deuced unsuitable thing for a refined woman to do, I consider. She knows I dislike it."

"You oughtn't to say that when she nursed you so splendidly. By Jove! I've——"

"Nursed me?"

"I've let the cat out of the bag, I'm afraid. She made me promise not to tell you. She left directly you became conscious; but she used to sit by the hour at your bedside. You wouldn't let go her hand, and talked incessantly about all sorts of things. You thought she was your sister Ellen."

"Ah! now I understand."

"It has always been my impression that she saved your life."

"She had better have left that alone."

A few days later Hugh Evans started for England. He formed one of the unsociable clique on board ship—spent a good deal of his time in the smoking-room, and spoke to very few people. He was thankful when he reached London, and walked into the "Rag" feeling as if he had not been away from it a month.

Flora and Lady Campbell, meanwhile, were settled in their pretty little house at Simla, which overlooked a grand rolling expanse of giant mountains. They met many acquaintances, and had to make a great many calls.

Not long after their arrival, Flora told her little friend of a plan she had considered very seriously for some time, although she did not let her guess what had urged her to form it.

Since those weeks near Delhi she had begun to realise that if she allowed herself to become the slave of a love for a man who, she told herself, was utterly indifferent, her life would never be anything but a useless one. She felt the necessity for action, and could not face again lonely days and hours, which had given much time for thought and recrimination.

She had talked a long while with Sister Pretty, and had heard from her that the little hospital

at Islamabad was, owing to insufficient funds, in danger of collapsing. She purposed supporting and superintending it herself, and keeping it going through the winter, chiefly for the use of native children.

Lady Campbell was not pleased.

"You'd be much better employed in keeping Hugh Evans' pipes off the mantelpiece of his drawing-room," she said.

But Flora never talked of her husband now, and such remarks remained unanswered.

CHAPTER XX.

One sunny spring morning Hugh Evans drove up to his old home with his steward. The long low house, that had been added to at different periods, stood on the side of a hill; behind were beech-woods, and in front smooth lawns sloped to the river, a brown-trout stream of many pools and eddies, the gentle murmuring song of which fell on his ears like a well-known melody heard again after years of silence. Beyond, hill and moor rose abruptly, and swept in undulating lines, until they lay blue and indistinct against the horizon.

The beauty of the scene entered into his soul. Either the place had changed somewhat, or he was different, for it seemed as if the home feeling had scarcely ever been so strong within him. The stately beeches outlined against the sky, the terrace, the rose-garden, pale green bracken in mighty patches on the hill, the dove-

cote, the cry of a peacock,—all set his heart beating. It was his own—a sweet English nest, a peaceful haven to which he would fly some day when work was over. But not alone. The bachelor life had, strange to say, lost its charm; and as he wandered through the old rooms, looked at the old pictures and household gods, the thought uppermost was, "How will she like it all?" In a cabinet he found a little water-colour drawing of his mother. He took it out and gazed at it for several minutes. "*Dulcis est amor*," he repeated, and then put the portrait in his pocket, saying, "I will show it to her."

But the next evening another mood overtook him, the boyish gladness of the previous morning vanished. He began to feel the loneliness of the place, and depression followed. Flora's apparent indifference at their parting came back with painful vividness. He had seen something now of her strong and determined will. Would she ever consent to give up her unreasonable desire to become a nurse? He freely anathematised this fancy of hers, imagining it to be a deep-seated devotion to the profession, which absorbed her whole nature. There were women he had heard who abandoned all thought of a husband, children, and home, preferring infinitely a professional

life, either in a hospital, or as artists, musicians, schoolmistresses, matrons. A love of independence, a wish to keep an isolated individuality, appeared to be at the bottom of this unaccountable choice.

But was Flora one of these? If he asked it of her, would she come to him lovelessly, an unwilling slave to duty? His hand tightened on his rod (he had wandered down the river to try for a fish), he grew pale under his sunburnt skin. He knew her well enough now, and in his mind there was only one answer to these ever-recurring questions: he had but to appeal to her sense of right, and she would come against her own wish, and conscientiously strive to do her best for the sake of the vow she had taken. He remembered that he had likened her at Muttiabad to a trapped creature fighting for liberty. Would she as his wife become once more the girl he had known formerly, reserved, unapproachable, crushed by a life of anxiety and self-suppression?

That was not the Flora he wished to keep at his side—not the Flora, shy and tender at one moment, proud and passionate at another, who haunted the rooms of his old home or waited for him on the terrace, her eyes full of love;

not the Flora who in his dreams had crossed the lawn to meet him, as Ellen used to do long years before—whom he had held in his arms, crying, "I have caught you at last, and you shall never go again."

She had escaped and vanished suddenly into air nevertheless; a mocking voice had cried, "Too late." The stream echoed it, and the wind swept with a wail over the moor as he awoke.

A fierce determination to win her love seized him. Tom had been right. No feeling of duty or responsibility prompted him in the matter. Without her the world was empty. He realised it fully, now that thousands of miles lay between them. It seemed to him that he must start again for India the very next day—that suspense and delay were maddening. Yet how strange it was. No one could be more amazed than he himself at the overwhelming emotions that assailed him. "I am as idiotic as any boy," he thought, recalling his ridicule of the tender passion in men of riper years.

Two days after his arrival he received a letter from a neighbour and old friend, Mrs Howell, the mother of his former *fiancée*, begging him to pay her a visit.

"Clary is here with her children," she wrote,

"and we want to see you and to hear about your wife."

He drove over one afternoon, and was welcomed warmly by the old lady.

"I am so glad you have come; you must be dull at Tremynfa all by yourself." She kissed him affectionately; it was pleasant to feel himself a boy again.

Mrs Wynward, the Clary of his youth, greeted him with placid friendliness. She was forty, stout, prosperous, and complacent. He had not seen her for five years, and it was difficult to recall the dainty creature whose fair and somewhat insipid beauty had wrought such havoc with his heart long ago.

Clary had always been well pleased with herself. In middle age she was more assured than ever that her children, her husband, her luxurious home in Yorkshire, her circumstances, and her opinions, were more satisfactory than those of other people.

No doubt this is an enviable state of mind; but as Hugh Evans sat and listened to stories of the boys at Eton, the girls' accomplishments, "Luke's" hunters, his ventures in cattle-breeding, his success on the moors the previous season,

and the improvements she was planning in the house, he felt dazed.

The "marks of that which once hath been" are strong, no doubt, but it was with a vague wonder that he remembered his misery and despair, and his genuine belief that nothing could ever possess real value for him again. This woman had destroyed his trust in her sex, and had indirectly driven him into a careless bachelor life, which might have still been his lot but for the strange piece of fate that had thrown him on a sick-bed, and brought him back from the borderland of death a married man.

"Why didn't you bring her home?" asked Mrs Howell, speaking of Flora.

"Oh, I—she had promised to go up to Simla with a friend who is not strong. Besides, I have only six months' leave."

"And do you mean to tell me that you have no photograph of her?"

"N—no; she hasn't been taken lately."

These questions were embarrassing. The next was easier to answer in one way, yet not in another.

"You must describe her to me. What is she like?"

"Well — it is rather difficult. I can't say whether she is pretty or not. *I* think she is: her face is never the same. When she is grave you would think she could never smile, and when she smiles it is impossible to believe she can be grave. She can ride — oh, better than most women and a good many men. She is always unexpected — people who are not intimate with her think her cold and proud; but if you know her you make a hundred discoveries every day——"

He paused, and Mrs Howell, watching him, smiled.

"I think you are very much in love with her still, Hugh."

"I think I am," he answered simply. Although he was forty-three he blushed; then he laughed, the old boyish laugh which brought back memories of the time when he had been such a constant visitor at their house, and she had looked upon him as her son. Mrs Howell loved him, and for years had not been able to forgive her daughter the disappointment she had caused them both. There had never been much sympathy between Clary and her mother; perhaps there was less now than ever.

"God willing, I will bring her to see you

next year," he said gravely, and she did not guess how much lay behind his quiet serious words.

"I suppose Mrs Evans knows very little of English ways," Clary observed with prim patronage. She laboured under the delusion that the English inhabitants of India are twenty years behind the times, and lack entirely the advantages of society.

"I think Indian ways are very like English ways."

"Really. But if you will come and stay with us, I shall be very glad to assist her about servants. They are a great difficulty nowadays, especially kitchen- and laundry-maids. I myself have had a good deal of trouble this last week: my kitchen-maid left at a moment's notice, because my cook complained of the way she prepared the vegetables. So tiresomely independent. Laundry-maids are the same. I am almost thinking of giving them up; but I have a great objection to steam-laundries."

"I am afraid we shan't be at home for good yet," he answered drily. It was very strange to come back from that great world beyond the sea, so full of mighty interests, where life and noble deeds are cheap, and to find folk at home wrapped

up in their own petty concerns. To Mrs Wynward India was a land of blacks, with some soldiers and a few civilians to look after them, in case they mutinied and murdered people.

Evans watched her carefully as she sat knitting a stiff garment for her youngest child; even her motherhood wanted grace, he thought. She was a curious study to him: the fair unmanageable locks had been tamed into a fashionable net-covered frizzle, the blue eyes had grown expressionless, her little rosebud mouth was set in lines of decision and self-satisfaction. Certainly the "twilight of this world" is "feeble" indeed, he reflected. Tennyson's lines came from the recesses of his memory in fragments—

> "How many 'mongst us . . .
> Do forge a lifelong trouble for ourselves,
> By taking true for false and false for true."

Thank God! it had not been a lifelong trouble in his case. A quick sigh escaped him, and he rose and went into the garden.

Clary looked up and watched him; she coloured slightly and smiled. It was not wholly unpleasant to think that poor Hugh had never quite got over that unfortunate affair long ago.

Hugh meanwhile was walking with his second

mother amongst the early roses, holding her basket. His spirits returned; she at any rate possessed a soul above cooks and steam-laundries.

There were many things to accomplish before his return to India. The house wanted repairs and an addition before it could be re-let. Not more than five hundred acres were left of a considerable estate, but even these required looking after; and he tramped over the place, and visited old tenants and village friends, with a determination to leave nothing undone. Everywhere they inquired for his wife, and rejoiced that some day he would live again at Tremynfa, and the sound of children's voices be heard in the old nursery once more.

Hugh Evans had never felt so thoroughly married before, and he listened with a smile to the old women's congratulations and happy prophecies: they made him feel impatient to be gone, and seemed to augur good luck.

He took his passage three weeks sooner than he had intended, and the days dragged only too slowly.

"I can see that you are tired of us, and that Wales hasn't the same charm as India this time," Mrs Howell remarked with a knowing smile.

There were no regrets for "the 12th," no uncomplimentary remarks about the authorities and their want of generosity as regards leave.

At times he was tempted to confide in this kind old friend, but the shadow of Flora's reserve had fallen upon him; and besides, whatever happened, he felt it would be best to keep the story of that absurd piece of eccentricity, the consequences of which had proved so unexpected, a secret between a few—if only for the sake of the girl who chose to say, "No one was to blame but myself."

When he reached Bombay, he found a letter from Tom Tremaine announcing the birth of Lady Campbell's little son at Simla, two months before. He had missed seeing this in the paper. The rejoicings were great, it appeared; and Sir George, a very proud father, was already thinking of buying a pony for his boy. He had become quite loquacious on the subject, people said; but, unluckily, his battery having been ordered to Agra, he had not yet seen his wife and his heir.

All this information Tom had received from Flora. Mindful of past experience, he enclosed her letter, a chatty, amusing, sisterly epistle, describing their life at Simla, giving bits of gossip about mutual friends, and,

womanlike, adding a page on the charms of the baby.

Evans had never read a letter of his wife's in his life. A pang of the old jealousy returned, as he noted the natural, unrestrained, girlish style, and realised that she opened out to Tom as she never did to him. But the proverbial postscript cheered him somewhat. "Where is my husband? when does he come back?" was scribbled at the end, as if an afterthought.

"My love, my darling!" he said tenderly, pressing the letter to his lips, "will you still refuse to kiss me, or shall I succeed in touching that rebellious heart of yours, in making you forgive me my blindness and folly? Jimmie would have been less of a fool by a long way. Why didn't I tell you that I worshipped you and couldn't live without you, instead of wasting all my energy in senseless jealousy of old Tom and the boys?" The thought had often come to Hugh with poignant regret that, but for his blindness to his own feelings and his foolish pride and obstinacy in allowing Flora's money to come between them, he might have persuaded her to accompany him to England. He remembered with

despair and self-condemnation his halting utterances at the station, and the stilted words which he had intended to say to her. It seemed to him now that he had unconsciously loved her from the day she had refused to ride Giroflé.

Several weeks more of leave were due to him, and he made a sudden resolve to travel straight up to Simla, sending word to his servant to forward letters to his club.

Lady Campbell was to go to Agra very shortly, and he felt sure that Flora would accompany her. There was no time to be lost.

And then? He dared not think. A strange restlessness seized upon him. It seemed long to have to wait a day even at Bombay, and it took three to reach Simla. Pshaw! how Tom and Selwyn and others would laugh at him.

He dined at the Yacht Club that night with some friends, who thought him absent-minded and unusually silent.

"What have you been doing with yourself at home, old chap?" asked one. "There's an air of abstraction about you that I don't recognise. Is it the beauty of the night? If you are going to quote poetry, I shall be glad to listen. 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I

wonder what you are.' There's a good deal of deep thought expressed in that line."

Evans laughed and roused himself. They had no reason to complain again.

The following Friday he reached Simla, and went to the club. There he found a good many letters awaiting him, and amongst them one the handwriting of which he recognised at once. It was from Flora.

CHAPTER XXI.

EVANS opened his wife's letter quickly, and read the following:—

"DEAR HUGH" (the useful post-card was not available on this occasion),—"I suppose you are at Gurmpore again. I hope you have enjoyed your time in England, and that you found all as you wished to find it. You will have seen the birth of Katie's little boy in the paper: they are so happy, and she is very well and jolly. We leave here on Tuesday. She goes to Agra, where George is now, as you probably know. It is too hot still; but I can't persuade her against it, she is so anxious to see him. I travel straight through to Kashmir. This is what I am writing to you about, for I feel"—here he could see that the words "you have a right" were erased and "I ought perhaps to tell you" substituted—"what I have

decided to do. I have always been fond of nursing and accustomed to a busy life, as you know; so hearing from Sister Pretty in May that the little hospital at Islamabad was to be given up from want of funds and some one to look after it, I have determined to carry it on myself as a memorial to Dick, with the money that was his, for I have now a great deal more than I require for myself. I shall of course live there entirely and superintend, with a regular trained nurse under me, teaching and doctoring the Kashmir children in the winter. If you ever have the misfortune to break a limb or to get an attack of fever when shooting up beyond there, remember the Niel Hospital; and I promise, as you always refuse *my* services on such occasions, that you shall have the best attention a good English trained nurse can give. I don't think you feel much sympathy with the profession; but I hope sincerely that you understand my wishes and motives in the matter, and will not in any way try and persuade me to relinquish what gives me the best chance of happiness in this world. As you have said more than once, it is useless looking back; but I want to thank you for the consideration you have always shown me, and

to say that I hope the friendship between us will continue. We have had a pleasant time here: since Katie has been about again, however, I have longed to begin work. I hope you found Rosewood and the live stock flourishing. I hear dear Giroflé has as usual been very successful in the races at Agra.—Believe me, yours, FLORA EVANS."

The letter had been written on the previous Thursday, a week before. A chill of deadly disappointment descended on Hugh Evans. He had certainly suffered at times from misgivings; but his sanguine nature had led him to take an optimistic view of the case, the very strength of his feelings lifting him out of despondency and bringing hope and confidence. Now the cup was dashed from his lips just as he had determined to quaff it. She had escaped him, had slipped away as in his dream at Tremynfa, and again he seemed to hear the dreary voice crying "Too late," and the wail of the wind on the hill.

He rose, and with unseeing eyes walked out into the street, turning his steps towards Jakko,[1] and passing the Lukka bazaar and Snowdon,[2]

[1] A hill at Simla. [2] Commander-in-Chief's house.

until the balconied villas that nestled among the trees grew fewer. He wanted to be alone, to gather his thoughts together, calm the tumult within him, and search for reason and composure.

The new moon was bright, the sky clear; but along the gigantic mountain peaks lay misty clouds, and a distant flash of lightning told of a storm in the deep hollows of the Himalayas: a sudden gust swept through the deodars. At another time the grandeur and beauty of the scene would have touched him, but he was blind to all but his own misery. He still held the cold stilted epistle which had worked the mischief in his clenched hand: it had cut him to the heart.

How many wrongs would be righted, how many mistakes wiped out, if we were possessed of that extra sense which some maintain lies dormant in most of us!—if only a bit of paper could convey thoughts as well as words! Many sheets had gone into the rubbish-basket before Flora achieved the masterpiece of cool diplomacy she thought so suitable to the occasion. One touch alone in the whole showed her real self, and even that — her joking allusion to their passage-of-arms at the bungalow near Delhi

— appeared almost disagreeable and sarcastic amongst its surroundings. She had wished to show calm dispassionate common-sense, to appeal for approval, and discourage adverse criticism, without allowing sentiment a place. Men were business-like in their correspondence; they liked women to be the same, she argued, feeling that her only salvation in the future lay in the possibility of arriving at a distinct understanding with her husband, and making a position for herself that would prevent all mistakes. She had the strong wish as well to relieve him from any sense of responsibility towards her which might still linger in his mind. And the result of all this thought was that her letter, instead of being natural and like herself, seemed hard and bald, even heartless, in the eyes of the man who had torn it open with boyish eagerness and expectancy. He scarcely knew how far he walked, but turned at last and retraced his steps. He was like one who, having climbed to a rocky summit, feels the ground give way beneath his feet and is hurled into the black sunless depths below, just as he opens his mouth to shout in triumph at his success.

It was a strange case certainly. Had she been Flora Niel, nothing would have prevented his

going to her and taking his chance with others, using all his eloquence in an attempt to win her through sheer power of will and determination: many a man had done the same before now. But the fact that they were man and wife changed everything: a feeling of honour restrained him. He recalled his despondent reflections at Tremynfa, and had not forgotten a single incident of the scene in the Liddons' garden. If he wrote to her reminding her that she had sworn before God to cleave to him in sickness and health, seeking the support of the stern master Duty whom she served, she would come to him just as she had then, after he fell ill, moved by the same spirit that had caused her to remain at his bedside at Gurmpore until consciousness returned.

Yet most women, from the Sabines onward, settled comfortably into placid domestic happiness after a while—so people said. Could he not teach her to love him through the force of his love for her? No; Flora was different to others: she must come of her own free will, not meekly, coldly, from a sense of duty, with all the passionate rebellion which had burst forth at times locked in her heart. Something lately had taught him to understand much that he had

formerly ignored, and to defy the conventional opinions he had accepted blindly so shortly before. He did not wish for a tame conscientious wife, who would become an excellent housekeeper and head-nurse, but for a companion, another self, soul of his soul—that or nothing. All the tenderness, the sweetness, the knowledge of what is highest and best, which had slept so long, awoke in Hugh Evans that night. With loss came a sense of the boundlessness of the inner life, that can reach God's footstool, yet will shrivel and die in the sordid trivial atmosphere of self.

It was growing late; he began to realise he had not dined. As he approached Simla again, several *'rickshas* passed him, the lamps twinkling in the darkness. There had been a party, and the returning guests laughed and shouted to each other, quite regardless of the fact that their somewhat unguarded observations could be overheard by any one within a quarter of a mile.

"I suppose Mrs Evans and Lady Puff have arrived safely by this time," a boyish voice said, after other remarks; and a girl's replied—

"Yes; I hope to hear from dear Mrs Flora to-morrow. Oh, how we shall miss her!"

"She did look ripping at the Barnes Court ball on Monday in that white frock!"

"I hear there have been great muddles about invitations, owing to their having hurried it on for her and Lady Puff."

"Oh yes; a grand joke. Mrs Magill's English maid was asked to assist in the cloak-room, and she herself never received an invitation. I believe Mrs Evans——"

The voices and laughter died in the distance. Too late! What a fool he had made of himself! Even in this Simla world she would have been nearer to him. Why had he not given up his trip to England and followed her here after their last unsatisfactory meeting? Now he had lost her, perhaps for ever; hundreds of miles already lay between them, and above all the words in her letter, "I hope you will not try and persuade me to relinquish what gives me the best chance of happiness," were irrevocable, pitiless, conclusive.

It was supposed by Evans' friends that he was in Simla on business, and he explained that having missed his wife's letter he had hoped still to find her there.

With the light came a certain calm, and he resolved to go to Agra and superintend personally the return of Giroflé to Gurmpore — he could not face the solitude of Rosewood — and also

determined to call on Lady Campbell and unburden himself to her. He had always wondered why she had not hinted at a knowledge of the truth, never guessing how fervent had been the little lady's desire to have a finger in the pie, and how absolutely Flora had prevented such a possibility.

A very different being went "down the hill" on the following day to the man who had travelled up from Bombay in hot haste; but Hugh Evans was not one to let trouble or disappointment conquer and subdue him. He determined to face courageously the fate in store for him, and, if convinced by Lady Campbell that Flora's happiness lay in the life she had chosen, to study her welfare, not his, thereby atoning to some extent for the wrong he had unintentionally done her.

It was late when he reached Agra; but he was restless, and wandered down to the Campbells' bungalow in the evening. He was anxious to see Lady Puff alone, and noticing the light that streamed from an open window on the verandah, thought he would use the privilege of a cousin and slip quietly into the drawing-room without waiting to be announced. His footsteps fell noiselessly on the soft rugs spread over the

stone floor. He paused a moment before entering, and glanced into the room; then drew back quickly and caught his breath. The scene upon which his gaze rested was unexpected and amazing. On a low sofa sat his wife; she was bending over a baby, who watched her with bright bird-like eyes as she talked to it in soft child-language. She wore a long white tea-gown, with clinging folds and dainty lace that half revealed her full throat and slender rounded arms—Flora's greatest beauty. The light of the lamp touched the russet tints of her dark hair and fell on her face, which was at one moment sweet and serious and at the next full of laughter. She was like a child herself as she played with the tiny creature, now holding it above her head, now half burying it amongst the blue silk cushions. Evans' heart beat, his pulses throbbed. This was his Flora, one of the glowing pictures that his brain had conjured up before now, come to life; not the girl who had written the cruel letter which still lay in his pocket. It was as if he had been given a glimpse of a lost paradise, sacred ground where he dared not tread.

The impulse seized him to enter boldly, and, before she knew he was near, to take her in his

arms and claim her; but he checked it. Just at that moment she seemed farther off than ever. The very contrast of her girlish abandon and gaiety to the reserve and indifference she had constantly shown in his presence held him back. He thought bitterly that she would freeze beneath his touch, and his presence fall like a cloud across her joyousness.

Before he was aware of it, she came to the window with the baby and stood framed in the square of light: he involuntarily shrank back against the wall amongst some tall large-leaved plants.

The night was brilliant: he could see her profile as she gazed up at the sky, at a crescent moon, at Orion and the pearly arch of the Milky Way. Then she said, half under her breath—

"How beautiful it is! Baby, baby, when you are a man you will 'want de moon to play wid and de stars to run away wid'; but you won't get them—you won't get them——"

The last words sank into something like a sob, and she caught the child more closely to her, kissed it, and began softly to croon a little nigger lullaby as she turned into the room again.

Evans could bear it no longer. With a groan he

strode away into the darkness: his lips were trembling, his face was white and drawn.

When he reached the club he sat down, and wrote a note to his wife worthy of hers in every way:—

"DEAR FLORA,—I hear you are in Agra. I came to-day in order to take back Giroflé, and am off again directly. Do you care to ride him to-morrow morning? If so, I will bring him round at half-past six. I received your letter, for which many thanks. Perhaps it is best to answer it in person; but rest assured that I will do my utmost not to oppose you in anything that is likely to bring you happiness.—Yours,

"H. V. EVANS."

He scarcely knew what moved him to this sudden action: he had no motive in asking her to ride with him beyond the strong necessity to see and speak to her alone, away from all others, if only once before she went into banishment.

No thought of what he would say was in his mind, no wish to coerce her, or even to speak of her letter, although he had alluded to it in his.

Browning's words would have come to him

then, had he been a student of that great master, as a key to the feelings that possessed him :—

> " I and my mistress side by side
> Shall be together, breathe and ride.
>
> What need to strive with a life awry?
> Had I said that, had I done this,
> So might I gain, so might I miss.
> Might she have loved me? Just as well
> She might have hated, who can tell?"

The servant returned in half an hour with a message that the *Memsahib* would be ready at the appointed hour.

CHAPTER XXII.

When Hugh Evans rode round to the Campbells' bungalow on the following morning, Flora was already standing on the steps waiting for him: she greeted him shyly, yet brightly. He shook hands with her in silence, and as he helped her into the saddle and arranged her habit, said, "I am glad you could come." She only smiled in answer, and gathered up her reins.

Certainly their ride was not a conversational one: they were both perfectly happy — speech would have been superfluous. He dismissed all thoughts but those of the moment. It was enough to enjoy the present without letting the shadow of the future darken its gladness.

They swept over the brown *maidan* together. Giroflé stretched his strong clean legs and showed what he could do, and Flora laughed with delight, and drew up panting and excited, her eyes sparkling, her cheeks glowing.

They passed through a native village. Before the yellow mud-huts old men smoked hubble-bubble,[1] cowering and shivering in scanty white garments that hardly served to protect their skinny bodies from the cool morning air, which was as baneful to them as it was invigorating to the two riders. Slender women, their *saris*[2] falling in graceful folds to their feet, fetched water in brass *lotas*,[3] poising them easily on their heads, and walking with the steady gliding gait which has become second nature to them; while pretty brown children played in the sand amongst goats and miserable pariah dogs.

There were many quaint sights to be seen by those who have eyes for the picturesque. Against the sky towered the great fort, which recalled so many tales of heroism and, alas! of murder and suffering. He told her the story she had often heard before of the relief of the place during the Mutiny,—of how those who had been so long confined within the grim red walls streamed out joyfully to meet the column, only to be driven back helter-skelter by the sudden appearance of the enemy, whom they had imagined miles away: but for the readiness and courage of our troops,

[1] Native hookah.

[2] *Sari*, scarf-like drapery.

[3] *Lota*, brass water-vessel.

another bloody page might have been added to the history of those terrible days. She listened, content to hear the tale again from his lips: the interest of that tragic year will never die.

Then over the cavalry jumps and along the edge of the sandy road beneath the *peepul*-trees, where they curbed their ponies' impatience and guided them between the fields of young grain and through rugged *nullahs*, until the sun grew higher in the heavens, and reluctantly they turned towards home, knowing that their day was over.

"Are you determined?" were the words on his lips, but he feared to chase the smile from her face. "What need to strive with a life awry?" It often happens that we fret our brains and agonise our souls over unmanageable problems, and so lose sight of the most natural solution of the difficulty. To tell her simply that he loved her never occurred to him. His heart sank heavy as lead, and she strained her eyes into the future with a dull hopeless feeling of finality. Sunny Islamabad had hitherto seemed a haven of peace; now it rose as an island of banishment cut off from the world and all that meant happiness.

Scarcely a hundred yards left, then only fifty;

but in those fifty was enough space to change the course of two lives. They might jump the mud wall of the compound and reach the house from the back, Flora suggested. Evans was in the front, she followed.

O Giroflé! wise steed, whose caution was proverbial, did some invisible agent whisper in your ear? Had your rider's hand lost skill and power at that moment? The pony landed safely on the inside of the wall, but as he did so slipped and rolled over, throwing the girl heavily to the ground. She did not rise. Evans was at her side in an instant, full of horror: he raised her slightly, and saw that her temple had struck the hard soil. He rubbed her hands, shouting for help meanwhile, then unfastened the neck of her white drill jacket and the stiff linen collar. As he did so, his signet-ring caught in a slender chain that hung round her throat, to which was attached a piece of folded paper. The jerk broke the clasp. He would have replaced it; but as his eyes fell on the writing he looked again, and the colour rushed to his face: an extraordinary expression passed into it of wonder and incredulity.

He turned on her, as she lay with her head against his breast, a look of intense horror and

apprehension: she was pale and still as death. For one dreadful moment a fear seized him that his beloved was about to be snatched from his grasp: then he saw her lids flutter, and the lips part with a little sigh. He pushed the chain and note hastily into his pocket as the Campbells ran up: they had seen Giroflé pass the window riderless.

"She is only stunned," he whispered breathlessly to Lady Campbell, taking Flora in his arms as if defying interference; "I will carry her to the house."

She glanced at him in surprise, for his eyes were soft and black, his face was radiant.

About ten minutes after he had deposited his burden on the sofa in the drawing-room, Lady Puff came to him in the verandah.

"Yes, she was only stunned," she said, "and is feeling nearly all right; but I am a stern woman"—her eyes danced—"and I have taken her to her room and ordered her to lie quite quiet in the dark for some hours,—no excitements, no conversation." Then, reading rebellion in his eyes, she added, more seriously, "That is the only way with concussion of the brain."

"*Concussion of the brain!*"

She smiled. "You needn't be alarmed; a

blow on the head, then, if you prefer it. Now go away, do, like a dear good man; don't you see I want to get rid of you? I sent you all off just now on purpose. I have told her you are engaged on important business until five o'clock. You may come back then—if you like; there!"

"What brought her here?"

"The merest chance. My little chap was not well; I begged her to stay for a few days. She goes on to-morrow."

"I don't think so."

He spoke so decidedly that she laughed and looked at him quickly, her sympathy on the alert; but she would not force a confidence.

"Come back at five."

"You will take care of her?"

"Oh yes," rather drily; "I have done that before now."

He went slowly, shrugging his shoulders like a spoilt boy reluctantly obedient: he was not the man to linger round the bungalow when told he was best out of the way.

A whole day! How should he get through it? Yet it was a wonderful day, made up of impatience, suspense, and a jubilant sense of happiness, almost bewildering, after the heart-sickness of hope deferred. Above all, resolve

was strong within him; man's master-will asserted itself, the primitive instinct to seize and keep his own in spite of all accidents of fate, circumstance, or woman's whim.

Dreams seemed reality on that day, and reality passed as a dream without substance, a picture background to his engrossing thoughts.

Luckily Major Ellis, his host, was a great talker, and therefore failed to notice his friend's absence of mind. He discussed the races, complained of the authorities, and gossiped to his heart's content as they walked about together and drove up to the Fort. Hugh was glad when he found himself alone in the sweet old gardens. Solitude was congenial to him just then, and he wandered through the graceful halls, admiring their delicate workmanship and tracery. In his mind a vision rose of what they had been in the days of the great Moguls, when maidens of the court stood on the squares of the marble chessboard, and moved to their master's word, or played with golden balls among the scented champak-trees. A luxurious, soulless existence of sensuous enjoyment: treacherous claws were hidden in the velvet paw. Below the mirror-lined baths of the harem—significant fact—lay horrid torture-chambers and

ghastly dungeons, deep in the earth, where screams and groans would be lost in the impenetrable darkness.

As he gazed from the walls at the smiling landscape, the far plains stretching wide and vast to the horizon, a flock of small parrots flew across and settled on the gleaming white balustrade, shining like green gems in the vivid sunlight. All was harmony and peace: on just such another evening, perhaps, the veteran emperor had lain dying, his face turned for the last time towards the tomb of the woman he had loved. Flora revelled in such old-world tales: they would come there together, Hugh thought.

He took from his pocket the bit of magic that had worked such a change in him (a slender chain and crumpled scrap of paper), and looked at it again and again, his eyes shining. It was the note he had sent his wife from the Liddons' bungalow near Delhi, apologising for his behaviour, and begging her to go to him. She had worn it near her heart ever since, and beneath the signature, in her own firm handwriting, were the words—

"Teach me, only teach, Love!
As I ought;
I will speak thy speech, Love,
Think thy thought."

And yet she had jealously guarded her secret, and let him believe that she was anxious to escape from him, and bury herself in a life of duty. Why had she done it? She must answer that question. It was growing late: his friend dropped him at the Campbells' bungalow, and he went in to find Lady Campbell alone, with a perplexed and rather harassed look on her sweet face.

"Oh, Hugh," she said, calling him by his name for the first time without a prefix, "she's gone."

"*Gone!* What do you mean?"

"Oh, not to Kashmir; you quite frightened me. But the dear thing, I can't make her out. When I told her you were coming to tea, she said nothing, only *looked*. And now you see she has given us the slip, which is just like her."

"Why should she wish to avoid me?" he asked rather huskily: for a moment he forgot the talisman in his pocket.

"Well, suppose I give you just a tiny wee hint; I think she is afraid you will try and prevent her going to-morrow."

"I intend to do so."

"But why?—tell me why. My dear man, please, *please* don't make her go back with you

unless you love her very, very much. It would —would kill her."

"But supposing I do love her very, very much?"

"Oh!" The exclamation came with a gasp.

"I would go down to hell for her!" fiercely.

"That is not necessary, luckily. You are rather alarming to-day, Hugh." The little lady spoke lightly, but her lips trembled; her friend's happiness lay very near her heart. She added softly, with a suggestion of tears, "That makes everything different. I hoped somehow this morning that you — but you see Flora is such a dear silly person, she has never forgiven herself for having done it—you know what I mean. I don't think she can believe in the possibility of your caring for her. And sometimes, do you know, although she never speaks directly of it, she makes me feel the same. You men are such funny people; you can be very fond of a woman and yet not wish for her society always, can't you? Now we are different; we either care for a man or we don't. If we don't, we can't be bothered with him; if we do—oh, well, I suppose we are rather stupid. But how was it you stayed away so long? What made you go to England without—without saying one word to her?"

"Why do you recall sins of which I am only too painfully conscious? But, Lady Puff, look here; tell me instead where she is. You know quite well, or you guess,—I can see it in your face."

"Don't come near me, then; don't seize my wrists in an iron grasp: I am a little bit afraid of you."

Half an hour later he stood beneath the entrance arch of the great gateway, beyond which rose, in the tender evening light, the most wonderful temple in the world—a vision of pearly loveliness set in dusky cypresses. But Hugh Evans had no eyes for the beautiful mysterious Taj, or for the enchanted gardens, excepting that their scented groves hid from him the woman he loved.

He found her at last, alone, gazing dreamily at the graceful dome and minarets, which cast long shadows on the whiteness of the alabaster terrace. He was close to her before she became aware of his presence. Then she turned with a startled look, and gave a little cry.

"I came to find you," he said quietly. "I want to say something to you, and you must listen."

She glanced at him in troubled silence; his manner puzzled her. He had put a strong con-

straint upon himself, and he deceived her, s was his intention.

"What do you want to say?" she asked presently in a low voice, her eyes on the ground. He watched her narrowly, then continued without mercy—

"Child, it is best to break it to you now. Do you think you are going to Kashmir? No; you have enjoyed freedom long enough. We don't love each other. The whole thing's humbug, isn't it? I expect old Shah Jehan himself built this for self-glorification and nothing else. But my home is the place for my wife; the servants are troublesome, the bungalow is untidy. I want a housekeeper."

She turned on him in utter amazement, and threw up her head proudly—

"What do you mean?"

The words were few, but they spoke volumes. He never forgot the look she gave him—in it pride and the old revolt struggled with pain and reproach.

"I mean that you swore a solemn oath before God to obey me, to forsake all others: if you consider your duty, you will not hesitate."

His tone was abrupt, almost harsh. She writhed under his words, and did not see the

amusement that lurked in his eyes—for he was in the shadow—or guess that he was acting.

"You cannot ask it—you cannot——" she stammered, and began to tremble.

"Have you lost anything?"

"I?"

He held the chain and scrap of paper towards her on the palm of his hand. She recognised it instantly, and a furious blush dyed her face and neck crimson. She cried desperately, like one forced to surrender at last, "How dared you! You stole it from my neck this morning. I knew it. How dared you! It was unmanly—unkind——"

"Is that why you ran away from me?"

She covered her face with her hands. But he laughed softly, gleefully, then took her fingers in his and drew them gently down, gazing at her earnestly. His voice changed, and grew tender and deep, setting a seal of truth on his words.

"My darling! look at me—forgive me! What a brute I am! My only excuse is that I love you—*I love you.* I am sure old Shah Jehan never loved Nourmahal a quarter as well as I love you. I am sure he was never as miserable for want of her as I have been for want of

you. If I lost you I would build a Taj in my heart ten times as large! God knows I have been a fool, but don't punish me any more. I ran up to Simla on Friday after you and got your abominable letter, which tied me hand and foot. If it hadn't been for a blessed chance and that sainted infant—may he live for ever! —I might have lost you, *from a sense of duty*. But you shall come of your own free will or not at all. There—I won't touch you." His arms fell. "Go—leave me if you like!"

Flora's sweet dark eyes were wet.

"I—I thought you didn't care—enough. I wanted you to feel free," she said brokenly, and her head drooped. "Don't you see that I had to go right away because—because it was breaking my heart. Ah, Hugh, why wouldn't you understand?"

Smiles conquered the tears and transformed her. With a sudden characteristic gesture, shy yet passionate, she slipped her arms round his neck and raised her face to his.

. . . . . .

In the shadow of the great empress's tomb Love the eternal conquered once more.

He understood at last. Even Jimmie would have expressed approval, and indeed might

have learnt with some surprise that in most of us are depths unsuspected by ourselves and those who know us best. As with men and women who feel much, words were few. Laughter was on their lips, but in their hearts happiness too deep for expression, and boundless gratitude.

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